

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

13 February 2017

The sixth day of the Royal Commission's Catholic "wrap up" hearing was held today in Sydney. Today's hearing featured a panel on seminary formation, and then Dr Gerardine Robinson, a clinical psychologist.

Background to witnesses on seminary panel

The first panel dealt with seminary formation, and the relevant aspects of the witnesses is outlined below.

Bishop Tony Randazzo, Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney, attended the seminary in Brisbane between 1985 and 1991, and was its rector between 2009 and 2015.

Father David Ranson appeared at the Commission last week. His appearance today was in relation to a paper on seminary formation in Australia in 1997.

Father John Chalmers taught at the seminary in Brisbane for 20 years, and served as its rector between 1995 and 2000. He left the Commission hearing at the morning tea break because he is suffering from Parkinson's Disease.

Dr Chris Geraghty is a former Priest and retired District Court judge. He attended the Sydney seminary formerly at Springwood from 1951, and taught there before leaving the Priesthood in 1976. He wrote a book regarding his time as a seminarian and Priest.

Seminary Life

Each witness was asked about their views on seminary formation based on their own experience as a seminarian and staff member.

Bishop Randazzo

After detailing his own vocation story, Bishop Randazzo spoke of his time at the Seminary and in particular, answered questions about formation on celibacy. He said that formation on celibacy was given every year, including workshops and a week-long session. He said that celibacy was not presented as a "denial," but an encouragement to seek out life giving, healthy relationships.

As vocations director in Brisbane, Bishop Randazzo established Canali House in Brisbane, a place where young men considering entering the seminary can reside for up to a year whilst going about their lives but also sharing some common life. It is here, he said, that psychological formation begins, with Canali House's director, a psychologist, also the pastoral director for the seminary, meaning that there is continuity in psychological assessment. He said that external psychologists were also used, and there was a specific goal to normalise psychological assistance so that the seminarians would not be afraid to seek it before and after Ordination.

Bishop Randazzo said that there is a focus on seeing the seminarians being formed in society – including attending mainstream universities – rather than apart from it.

Dr Geraghty

Dr Geraghty entered the seminary in Springwood in 1951, and described it of having “military discipline” with no contact permitted with the outside world. He said that his only formation on celibacy was a single lecture on the sixth commandment delivered in Latin following diaconate ordination, and that as a formator, he was prohibited from speaking about sex or celibacy.

Father Chalmers

Father Chalmers entered the seminary in 1967, and spoke about enormous change in the world and in the Church. He said there was an interaction with laypeople and with other Christian denominations which was not there.

Father Ranson

Father Ranson spoke of his concern of the importance placed on the initial psychological assessment of seminarians, saying it was a snapshot in time but of limited use unless engaged with on an ongoing basis. He said that the seminary model still focuses on intellectual formation rather than human or pastoral, and suggested reducing the time spent in formation and instead allowing newly ordained clergy to withdraw from ministry for two or three months each year to reflect on their ministry and learn from that.

Clericalism and the role of the Priest

Justice McClellan asked whether the Church’s understanding of ontological change occurring at Ordination has meant that clergy and laity see the Priest as different or special (and consequently, leading to a culture where their actions are not questioned.) Bishop Randazzo responded that the best way to understand the “separation” of a Priest is his being set apart for service, not for privilege.

There was also a discussion of clerical dress, and in particular, the wearing of soutanes. Bishop Randazzo said clerical dress didn’t necessarily equate to clericalism, but a thought about what was appropriate for the occasion. He told the Commission that he had worn a soutane yesterday when on a parish visit, but would obviously not do the same at the beach or while watching the State of Origin. He described the seminarians at the Seminary of the Good Shepherd in Sydney – who, he said, wear soutanes when serving in solemn liturgies – as well adjusted men.

There was also a discussion of the reliance placed on Priests which is not placed on others: an assumption of constant availability, the ability to manage the equivalent of a small business (personnel, workplace health and safety, finances and the like) of a parish while also having responsibility for the pastoral and spiritual life of the community.

Father Ranson also pointed out that the Priest is expected to have a “dual relationships” with their flock, being both a minister to them and cultivating genuine friendship with them. He said that this requires extraordinary self-awareness and suggested that Priests be particularly formed in relation to the amount of trust that will be placed in them.

Asked if this could be accomplished by specific rules, Bishop Randazzo said that professional standards needed to be more than rules, but an attitude of taking responsibility for one's actions, and having a desire that no child or vulnerable person is ever harmed, because it would offend against their dignity.

Clergy and seminarians from overseas

There was also a discussion about seminarians who come from overseas, or those Priests who were formed and ordained overseas and have come to Australia to minister. Bishop Randazzo spoke about the processes of accepting seminarians from overseas, including the police and psychological tests conducted. Father Ranson said that there was no a diocese in Australia not dependent on migrant clergy. He said that he is not sure that the Church has asked about whether their training has included the appropriate attitudes towards child protection which exist in more 'western' countries, calling it an 'open question.'

Background of Dr Gerardine Robinson

Dr Robinson is a clinical psychologist. She worked previously at the Saint Luke Institute in the United States for treating clergy with a history of alcohol and substance abuse, as well as psychosexual disorders. She estimates she saw 200-300 clergy child sex offenders during that time. She was the clinical director of Encompass Australasia for 11 years, treating 60-70 child sex offenders (not all clergy) before it closed in 2009. She told the Commission that Encompass's research into the causes of child sexual abuse was incomplete at the time it closed, and said the closure has left a 'big hole.'

She said that her work with clergy is mainly in relation to adult boundary violators and not child sex offenders, commenting that this is much more common.

The focus of Dr Robinson's work is a multidisciplinary approach to clinical assessment, because not all disorders are caused by psychological factors, but also biological ones. She said that this is preferable to the in-house assessment done in some seminaries, because the same expertise does not exist in an in-house model.

Clergy profile

Dr Robinson said the Catholic Priesthood attracts people with dependent, compulsive, schizoid and narcissistic personality traits. She said the good elements of these of these are a love of people and a desire to make their lives better, a willingness to see tasks through, build relationships and be self-starters. The negative aspects include the seeking of identity through external affirmation or accomplishments, a fear of intimacy and a sense of entitlement.

The Church's teaching on sexuality need to change

Dr Robinson said that even the best seminary formation procedures were not useful unless the environment allowed people talking openly about their sexuality. She said that the Church's teaching on homosexuality contributed to silence and shame around issues of sexuality in the seminary, because of a young man who was struggling sexually would not volunteer information to those who could make a decision about whether they continue in the seminary. She said repression was a defence mechanism. Dr Robinson said that while there has been a change in attitude

regarding child sexual abuse, there will be a significant problem unless the Church's teaching around sexuality changes.

Clericalism and celibacy

Dr Robinson said that the rigid style of some seminaries contributed to clericalism, and suggested that she is curious as to the reason young men insist on wearing soutanes or attending Tridentine. She advocates for optional celibacy, saying that while it is not causative of child sexual abuse, it is a problem for vulnerable people.

Care of offenders

Finally, Dr Robinson said that the risk of a person reoffending is dependent on them having meaningful work and a supportive social network, and commented that laicising an offender and isolating them could lead to reoffending.

The hearing continues tomorrow.