

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

21 February 2017

The eleventh day of the Royal Commission's Catholic "wrap up" hearing was held today in Sydney.

Today's panel featured Bishops from "smaller" dioceses: Archbishop Christopher Prowse, Archbishop of Canberra-Goulburn, Archbishop Julian Porteous, Archbishop of Hobart, Bishop Daniel Hurley, Bishop of Darwin, Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen, Bishop of Parramatta, Bishop Christopher Saunders, Bishop of Broome, and Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay, Maronite Bishop of Australia.

Disclosure of abuse from Bishop Long

Although it occurred at the very end of today's testimony, it is worth mentioning as the initial item in this summary. Bishop Long told the Commission that he is a survivor of clerical sexual abuse:

I was also a victim of sexual abuse by clergy when I first came to Australia, even though I was an adult, so that had a powerful impact on me and how I want to, you know, walk in the shoes of other victims and really endeavour to attain justice and dignity for them.

Reaction to the data revealed during the Commission

A number of the Bishops commented that they were shocked at the size and scale of clerical sexual abuse in Australia after hearing the statistics reported by the Royal Commission. They said that while they had an idea of the history in their own diocese and had each met with victims and had been told of the personal effects, hearing it on a national scale was shocking.

The Bishops were asked how this could be shocking to them, and that they could still be grappling with understanding the crisis, given that the Church has had a response mechanism in place for more than 20 years. Many of them described the continual learning process which they needed to undertake as more information came to hand, and as they began to hear from people outside the Church, including survivors and the Royal Commission.

Factors which contributed to the crisis

The Bishops were asked what they considered could have contributed to the sexual abuse crisis. Archbishop Porteous said that the Church did not understand the seriousness of the damage done to victims, nor the seriousness of issues in the perpetrator. He said that the cultural reasons were difficult to grasp, but that avoiding scandal would have been an issue.

Bishop Hurley gave an analogy with the Don Dale Detention Centre scandal, saying it was the result of "unscrutinised trust," which should never happen when it comes to children. He also spoke of an enormous differentiation of power, isolation and lack of supervision, an acceptance of less than best practice and a "closed shop" mentality, and drew parallels between these failures and those of the Church.

Clericalism and celibacy

Clericalism and celibacy were discussed together, as parts of a culture which contributed to the abuse crisis.

Archbishop Prowse described clericalism as the abuse of power, and the need to understand power as being ordered towards service.

Archbishop Porteous was asked about a reversion to more traditional understandings of Priesthood. Archbishop Porteous said a priestly culture, like any other “professional” culture, and particularly those geared at helping others, was to motivate and inspire those undertaking them to high ideals, and he wanted to encourage that. He described clericalism as the abuse of the priestly culture and spirit. Archbishop Julian said that while he was not convinced that celibacy was the problem, formation about celibacy could have been. Commissioner Murray challenged him on this, suggesting that any of the ‘cultural’ factors discussed at the Commission would not be themselves significant, but needed to be considered as parts of a culture which contributed to abuse.

Bishop Hurley also compared the Priesthood to other professions, drawing an analogy to the deference shown to doctors, but called clericalism a ‘pathology.’ He also spoke about the connection between clericalism and celibacy, saying that a healthy celibacy needed to be understood as a total gift of self to the people.

Bishop Long said that the return to a more “traditional” approach amongst seminarians was a by-product of the two previous pontificates, which encouraged a certain restoration of the traditional model of Church. He described clericalism as a by product of a model of Church underpinned or sustained by a theology given by the last two pontificates, with a “perfect society” model of Church which had a divinely-inspired pecking order of Pope, Cardinals, Bishops, Priests, religious and then the lay faithful. He said that this model of Church was no longer relevant and should be dismantled.

He said that compulsory celibacy was an act of setting apart of Priests, and that this needed to be seriously reviewed. He also spoke against the use of titles, saying being called “My Lordship” made him cringe, and that the practice of kissing a Bishop’s ring encourages an infantilisation of the laity. He said the Church needed to be understood as *communio*, and a discipleship of equals emphasising relationships instead of power.

Bishop Long also said that the marginalisation of women and the laity is part of the culture of clericalism that contributes “not insignificantly” to the sexual abuse crisis, suggesting a review of the exclusion of the laity from the appointment, supervision or removal of Priests or Bishops.

Bishop Saunders also commented on the understanding of the Church as *communio* rather than a “perfect society,” which he said was a redundant, pre-Vatican II understanding of the Church. He also said that there needs to be more focus on recruitment and formation of candidates for the Priesthood.

Catholic Professional Standards Limited

Archbishop Prowse told the Commission that he was delighted that Catholic Professional Standards Limited would provide a national structure which would provide consistency across Australia. Asked what he thought the role of the Archbishops in Australia in terms of leadership, Archbishop Prowse said it was signing up to it, speaking with one voice, backing it with finance and giving way to its recommendations so that there is a docility in all the dioceses.

The Maronite Church in Australia

The Maronite Church was dealt with separately from much of the discussion. Bishop Tarabay explained its differences in terms of liturgy, the recognition of the Patriarch as the head of the Church, and the acceptance of married clergy.

In speaking about celibacy, Bishop Tarabay explained that celibacy was always part of the Maronite Church, but those called to celibacy would join a monastery, while those who were to work in parishes were encouraged to be married. He said that it was only since last century that Priests who wanted to work in parishes began to be celibate, and that this was largely due to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Today in Australia, celibate Priests do not live alone, but rather with other Priests allowing both supervision, and a community of support.

Bishop Tarabay spoke of a single complaint amongst Maronite clergy, telling the Commission the Priests were currently in prison.

The hearings continue tomorrow.