

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

23 February 2017

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

The Commission began at 8am, with three members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, Professor Sheila the Baroness Hollins, Kathleen McCormack AM and Bill Kilgallon OBE, giving evidence.

In the afternoon, Australia's five metropolitan Archbishops, Archbishop Denis Hart of Melbourne, Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP of Sydney, Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB from Perth and Archbishop Philip Wilson from Adelaide.

Work of the Pontifical Commission

The witnesses explained that the role of the Pontifical Commission is in providing advice about policy and education. They said that their work is done mainly through working groups in six different areas, with meetings in plenary discussing the work done by these groups and formulating recommendations to present to the Holy Father.

Difficulties faced by the Pontifical Commission

The witnesses explained to the Royal Commission that the Pontifical Commission does not sit within any particular Vatican office (dicastery) because its remit is broad and cuts across many different groups. While this was beneficial, the Pontifical Commission also had to build relationships with each agency, which could pose difficulties.

Ms McCormack told the Royal Commission that the Pontifical Commission's work was lacking because of its small budget. Mr Kilgallon agreed, but also said that the Pontifical Commission had never been denied resources when asking for them, and it was confirmed that further requests for funding will likely be made after the next Pontifical Commission meeting.

The witnesses also spoke of the difficulty of working across the world, including in jurisdictions where child abuse is not even considered a crime. They told the Royal Commission that in certain countries, child protection was about mainly about preventing them from being drafted into military service or pushed into sex trafficking, with the consent of authorities.

Continuing professional development

Baroness Hollins advocated for compulsory continuing professional development for clergy, but noted that any 'licensing' system of Priests linked to continuing education or professional supervision should not affect the sacramental aspect of a Priest's role, but only other parts of his ministry.

Mandatory reporting

Senior Counsel assisting the Royal Commission, Gail Furness SC, asked why there had not been a guideline introduced which would require mandatory reporting regardless of the civil laws of the relevant countries. The witnesses explained that in countries which have some form of sharia law,

the victim or person reporting sexual abuse was also punished. Mr Kilgallon suggested the guidelines would likely require reporting unless there would be danger to the victim.

In the afternoon, Australia's five metropolitan Archbishops gave evidence before the Commission.

Failures in leadership

Each Archbishop was asked whether they agreed with Archbishop Costelloe's written statement which suggested that the sexual abuse crisis indicated a "catastrophic failure," and specifically, a catastrophic failure of leadership in the Church in Australia.

Archbishop Costelloe said that it was a catastrophic failure in leadership, and that the failures in other respects, such as the failure to keep people faithful to their commitments, were also related to poor leadership. All the other Archbishops agreed.

Archbishop Fisher said that those who responded were either "criminally negligent" in their failures, or were stuck as deer in the headlights. This response prompted applause from those in the room.

Institutional responsibility

Ms Furness asked whether the Archbishops considered there to be an institutional responsibility for the abuse scandal. All of them agreed, but made some additional comments.

Archbishop Wilson highlighted that there were many parishioners who were not responsible for the scandal. Archbishop Fisher said that while individuals should be held to account for their deeds and failure to respond, the whole community hangs its head in shame and the present leaders have a responsibility to do what they can to bring about redress.

Archbishop Coleridge said that the institutional responsibility should not be underestimated, even though it does not negate the individual responsibility. He said that a Church so deeply embedded in society and responding to the demands of the Gospel have a solemn obligation to be part of the solution, working alongside others.

Apologies and meetings with survivors

Each Archbishop gave the Commission details of previous public apologies they have given, in both written and oral form. Archbishop Fisher repeated the apology before the Commission, saying:

I repeat again, in this forum today, my apology for the shameful things that happened, especially the harm to victims.

They each then spoke about private meetings with survivors, both through the formal Towards Healing or Melbourne Response, and in other settings where the survivors did not go through a Church process. Archbishop Fisher said that he had initiated contact with some survivors after hearing their story, and also through survivor groups. He said that he would meet survivors wherever they felt comfortable, including in coffee shops, at a park or even a cricket field.

How the crisis happened

The Archbishops were all asked about how they thought the crisis occurred. Archbishop Costelloe repeated a previous comment from Archbishop Coleridge that the Church behaved as a “law unto itself,” Archbishop Wilson spoke of ignorance, and Archbishop Hart said that there was an ‘unreality’ in the way Bishops operated, not connecting with the crimes.

Archbishop Fisher spoke about tremendous ignorance of the prevalence in the community, in families and in the Church, ignorance of the terrible damage it caused and the repetitive nature of the abuse. He also said that there was a lack of empathy from the leaders, and a desire to protect not only the Church, but the ‘leadership class’ including parents and teachers who did not believe reports from children.

Archbishop Coleridge commented that there were not “good” or “bad” Bishops, but rather all of them had made the same mistakes. He described them as invariably ‘company men,’ with a passionate commitment to the institution which made them blind to the individuals. He also spoke of looking at abuse in a ‘spiritualised’ manner, which he said was a moment where the Church’s strength became a weakness.

Ensuring failures do not occur again

The Bishops spoke of greater collaboration on the issue of child sexual abuse at a local, national and international level. They also spoke of consultative leadership, telling the Commission that the culture of the Church had changed such that both Priests and the faithful would not allow a Bishop to exercise the same type of autocratic, monarchical leadership which contributed to the failures of the past.

Archbishop Fisher told the Commission that culturally, attitudes towards sex, power and religion has also changed; there is a focus on seeing as power being used for service, the language and discussion around sex has changed, and that there is a greater willingness for people to critique religion and religious leaders.