

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

14 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 current practices in seminary formation, and included seminary rectors, formators and others.

Background to witnesses

Sister Lydia Allen RSM, is the Director of Human Formation at the Seminary of the Good Shepherd, Sydney. She is a doctor of psychology, taught in the United States and Europe, and consulted for the Congregation for Catholic Education in relation to seminary formation.

Father Peter Thompson CM is Rector of Vianney College, Wagga Wagga. He has been a Priest for 50 years.

Father John Hogan is the Rector of Holy Spirit Seminary, Parramatta. He holds a degree in psychology and is studying for his masters in psychology.

Father Brendan Kelly SJ is the Provincial Delegate of Jesuit formation, which means he oversees the formation program for Jesuits. He holds a diploma and masters of education.

Dr David Leary OFM is a lecturer at Yarra Theological Union, Victoria. He is a former seminarian, and holds a masters in counselling and a PhD in health psychology. He is also the secretary of the province for Franciscans in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei.

Description of seminaries

Each witness was asked to provide basic information about the seminaries or formation houses at which they work, including number of seminarians, age range, nationality and the basic timeline of how long it takes a candidate to proceed from acceptance to ordination.

Screening processes

Sr Lydia Allen detailed the screening process for seminarians at the Seminary of the Good Shepherd in Sydney. She said that the Vocations Director would meet with a candidate on a monthly basis for about a year before they made an application to the seminary. During that time, the Vocations Director does an initial assessment on whether he believes the candidate has the capacity and willingness to enter the seminary. He writes a report, which is included with an application made by the seminarian. The application also requires police and medical checks, references from the candidate's Parish Priest and others in the community. Sr Lydia said that this range of reports was akin to the multidisciplinary approach described by Dr Gerardine Robinson in her testimony the day before.

The application is then reviewed by the Rector and by Sr Lydia, both of whom conduct interviews with the candidate. Sr Lydia also conducts various psychological assessments which are analysed and discussed with the candidate, before a report is written for the Vocations Director, the Archbishop and the Rector, and a decision made about whether the candidate is accepted.

Sr Lydia said she would look for psychiatric issues, a candidate's understanding of themselves and their sense of identity, their relationships with others, the development of their sexual identity, their sexual experiences, and the presence of same-sex attraction.

Homosexuality

Sr Lydia was challenged on the relevance of homosexuality to a candidate's suitability for seminary life, and was asked why the Vatican had issued [guidelines relating to the discernment of vocations for those with homosexual tendencies](#), which suggest that deep-seated homosexual tendencies are a barrier to acceptance into the seminary.

She explained that deep-seated homosexuality was more than same-sex attraction, but a desire to make that part of their identity, to be part of the gay community and a refusal to be of the same mind as the Church in such matters. Justice McClellan asked whether deep-seated heterosexuality was treated in the same way, but Sr Lydia said it was not, saying that there was a need for a person to accept the natural law and ideas of masculinity and femininity.

Dr Leary criticised this, saying that homosexuality did not impact on ministry, and that viewing it as a disorder had no basis in good theology or psychology. He said a capacity for compassion was much more critical. To illustrate his point, he told a story about showing a movie about grief and loss to his seminarian students, and receiving a complaint from one seminarian because the movie [possibly *Brokeback Mountain*] featured two gay men as the main characters.

Seminary structure

There was a continuation of the discussion from the previous day about whether seminarians should live in a seminary, or independently while they were studying. Dr Leary suggested that seminary life prevented seminarians from interacting with the outside world, describing certain recent ordinands as rigid, negative, closed and clericalist.

Father Hogan, Father Thompson and Sr Lydia disagreed that the current seminary structure was 'closed.' They explained that the men undertake studies at mainstream universities, engage in pastoral work in schools or hospitals or aged care facilities at least once a week, and have a 6 month placement in a parish during their formation. Those who encounter the seminarians in these settings are invited to give feedback to formators about their interactions with the community.

Clericalism

The discussion about clericalism also continued, again with a focus on clerical dress and liturgy. There was also a discussion about whether it was appropriate to teach that an ontological change occurs at Ordination, because of the risk that this encourages the laity to think of the Priest as 'special' or 'separate.' Sr Lydia said that clericalism was more to do with a person's interior state than what they were wearing.

Confession

Confession was also discussed, with the two issues presented last week raised again. The seminary rectors did not seem to agree with earlier evidence that absolution could be withheld from a truly

repentant offender, or whether it was possible to report a disclosure made by a child in the context of sacramental confession.

Describing child sexual abuse as a crime against humanity and the murder of a soul, Commissioner Murray described an insistence on the inviolability of the seal of confession as saying that “the seal of the confessional matters more than the murder of a soul.”

Pastoral care of victims

Another point which was raised (and which has been raised in previous hearings) was that the common theme emerging from interviews with victims is that, across the board, the Church is failing in pastoral care of victims.