

ROYAL COMMISSION INTO THE RESPONSE BY INSTITUTIONS INTO CHILD ABUSE

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Comments in answer to the focus questions relating to **Structure, Governance and Culture** of the Catholic Church in Australia

- The response of the Australian Catholic Church to victims of abuse ensures that the problem of individual priests and religious abusing individual children continues to be presented as a **singular activity** without any context. The Catholic Church deals with “cases” or complaints of sexual and other abuses, case by case, one by one. These “individualised” behaviours then continue to be thought about as simply aberrant behaviour of a few among the many. Until such time as this Church and other organizations begin to look at the **whole**, rather than the parts, then the full picture of why the Catholic Church has been so slow in addressing this and other abuses will remain hidden.
- The fact is that the Catholic Church in Australia, as elsewhere around the world, demonstrates incidents of systemic abuse at almost every level within its organization, on a continuing basis. The ‘outing’ of historical and current sexual abuse of children by clergy and religious, and the Church’s response, is merely a drop in the ocean of the kind of abuses that take place on every level, every day. The way the organization is structured, its hierarchical functioning and governance and its sworn obedience to this hierarchy internally, means that at every level the system is abusive to all those who are not “in” the organization or are not “in power” within the organization. This apartheid, be it based on gender or connection continues to this day.

By way of one example, the Church’s current rule that the topic of Women’s ordination to the priesthood is forbidden to be discussed, even to be spoken about within the Church, with the threat of excommunication for the speaker if this rule is broken, illustrates an organization that is so closed in its self-belief that it holds “the truth” that human rights rate at a very low level.

A second example is the secondary abuse the Catholic Church has subjected so many of its own victims to: the blind signing of confidentiality agreements; of victims being told that they are the only complainant, when in fact that is seriously untrue, the silence which grows further abuse, the waiting for information from the Church, the threat to take compensations away if people speak up. These and other abuses, witnessed by me over many years, is systemic abuse in action. It has not stopped. It will never be prevented, so long as the Catholic Church culture pays homage to ordained celibate men, be they in Australia or in the Vatican, rather than to the people they are meant to serve, and follow their directions rather than demonstrating decent, moral, professional behaviour.

- Any hierarchical organization which demands total obedience by its members, which denies members any capacity to answer to their individual conscience and which

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focuses heavily on controlling the personal sexuality of its members and limiting human sexuality as a means of loving (rather than procreation), will produce paedophiles and ephebophiles of both genders whose activity is hidden deep within the organization. The Catholic Church is one example of this. When discovered, this behaviour is vehemently denied by the organization and its members. It is, deeply hidden by silence which is impenetrable and is systemic. There is no safe space to even have a discussion about this. Those who name it as systemic will be side-lined. This kind of abuse continues today.

- The Catholic Church acts as an “as if” organization in many ways: it behaves ‘as if’ it is an open system, ‘as if’ it has its focus on caring for its members and others. It now is acting “as if” it really cares for victims and secondary victims. The reality is that the large amount of window dressing this organization involves itself in is, in and of itself, abusive, in that its leadership systemically and systematically ensures that its actions are covered up so as to retain the closed system that it truly is and to protect the organization’s ‘as if’ mentality.
- From a Socio-analytic perspective, the question would be asked: What is the Main Task of the Catholic Church? I am sure there would be thousands of opinions about this. Where any organization has so corrupted its own Main Task, then people within the organization will move in and out of role and **boundaries** will dissolve. Disappear even. The Catholic Church’s Main Task as a Christian Church has been deeply weakened, if not corrupted, by its own systemic focus on the self-preservation of power. When this happens clergy and religious and others will move out of role and abuses such as we have seen in Australia and elsewhere, will continue over time.
- Systemic abuse happens when at each and every level of any organization there are blockages to normal human wants and needs that are irrational, denied and/or hidden. This is clearly illustrated in the Catholic Church’s institutional response to abuse. Its structure and governance in itself ensures that no individual can be treated fairly. Long chains of command, heavy reliance on Lawyers who are unqualified to provide direction for answers to the pastoral problems they face, public denial of realities, fight or flight reactions of senior clergy and religious, and a determination to stick to the letter of the law and not its spirit, has all culminated in the kind of response that victims of sexual and other abuses have been forced to engage with. No matter what protocol or procedure it puts in place, the culture of this Church is such that outcomes will always be in the hands of those on top of the hierarchy. Those who name this as systemic abuse are seen as traitors or whistle-blowers and are punished accordingly.
- The Culture of the Catholic Church in Australia as described continues, despite the fact that many of its leaders have been advised many times over by “outsiders”, usually professional such as myself, that their behaviour is corrupt and that their response to sexual abuse of children needs deep and cathartic systemic changes in the way it is responded to. Equally they have been told over and over again that paedophiles,

newly released from gaol, should not have access to children, should be closely supervised and monitored. The Catholic Church in Australia is **not** on a “learning curve” as we have been told so many times during this Royal Commission. They have been told over and over again over the past many years that there is a different way to think (systemically) about its response to sexual abuse of children by clergy and religious and despite attempts by many, including myself, over the past twenty or so years, to change its ways, it has not and it will not.

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