

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

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Comments in answer to the focus questions relating to **Support for and Supervision** of working priests and religious

- No matter what plan is drawn up or supervision promise clergy and religious make, the Catholic Church in Australia has no track record of providing adequate professional supervision to its Church leaders or to its Clergy. Supervision is seen at best as a kind of 'debrief' on difficult and stressful work that is undertaken, or on difficult relations (such as with a Bishop). At worst it is seen as an imposition that is not to be taken seriously, or an abomination, an imposed and not-useful action that panders to psychology, brought about and inflicted upon them by the poor behaviour of other Clergy and Religious.
- It has been my experience that some Religious and Clergy tell untruths about supervision and how it is carried out. For example, I have seen several occasions in which a religious-paedophile who has recently been released from gaol has had no supervision whatsoever. They live where they wish, spend what they like on their credit card, travel wherever and whenever they want to and spend their 'freedom' doing exactly whatever they wish. NO supervision is supplied by anybody. They are able to state that supervision is provided because a Religious person might belong, loosely, to some kind of community which has a "superior". Ask this superior about the whereabouts of the tried criminal, newly-released from gaol, and you will find silence. Religious priests and clergy lie about receiving supervision. There is no overview and no accountability or review of Supervision and its effects.
- The culture of the diocesan priesthood and of Religious Brothers who are ordained priests, has characteristics that distinguish it from the cultures of other professions, which impact directly on what Supervision might actually mean, how real it is and whether or not it is transparent in terms of process. These characteristics include:
 - The hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the church, which no amount of Supervision will change.
 - Papal allegiance, which ensures that the promise of allegiance to the Pope, secured by a series of oaths and promises taken by cardinals, bishops and priests, includes **"...not to reveal to anyone what is confided to me in secret, nor to divulge what may bring harm or dishonor to the Holy Church"** means that supervisees cannot be open and honest with their supervisor because they cannot disclose what is really going on.

-An ordination which is said to confer an **ontological** change. This means that priests are “ontologically “different from the non-ordained. A person who perceives himself as ontologically different from others and feel – consciously or not – that he is superior to others. How could such a person, therefore, ever believe that he could benefit from supervision, especially if this supervisor is not a priest, or is simply a professional man or woman? Why would he break ranks with someone ordinary?

-Special education and training of priests separates a priest from the community ensuring the culture of clericalism and also ensuring he is separated from those he is expected to serve. The lack of supervision by external professionals to seminarians is one example of this as is a culture of anti-counselling or anti-psychology.

-Celibacy requirements tie a priest, in a unique way, to his promise of obedience to the bishop. It becomes one more link in the chain that not only distinguishes the priest from the rest of the faithful, but also ties him more tightly into the clerical culture, shoring up institutional loyalty. This is a real road block to supervision. Not every supervisor would be equipped to discuss psycho-sexual difficulties with their supervisee.

-Relative Independence means that Priests and Religious are not subject to performance appraisals, they receive very little feedback from other priests, and is seldom monitored in his daily activities. Even those who may attend supervision meetings, only discuss those issues which they bring to the Supervisor. It depends on individual honesty. They do not have to attend training updates or engage in professional development. This relative independence allowed some priests to gain unobserved access to children, and it was one of the contributing factors in the clergy sexual abuse scandal in Australia and elsewhere.

-Special privileges concerning compensation and lifestyle reinforces the specialness of a priest or of Religious. They are shielded in every way from suffering financial problems faced by their parishioners. Most employ household help. Many priests and religious receive gifts of clothing and cash, overseas trips, entertainment, dinners out, from compassionate parishioners. They cannot lose their jobs regardless of how incompetent they may be. Supervision would be paid for by the Diocese or the Parish or the Religious Order, ensuring that it need not be fully engaged with.

- The supervision of clergy and religious men and women needs to be overseen, reviewed, have feedback loops, and be accountable. My experience in providing such supervision is that if a religious or clergy do not like the questions they are asked during supervision, then they simply change supervisors. There is no accountability of any kind. No progress review. It goes on everybody’s “word”, which as we have now seen, holds little value.

References

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