

BRIEFING NOTE TO ROYAL COMMISSION INTO INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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1. INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to prepare brief notes, for the purpose of evidence, on the “the formation of clergy and religious, current practices in formation, and support for and supervision of working priests and religious”. The core task is to focus on what every person needs, by way of formation experiences, if they are to engage in person to person work, in this case pastoral work.

As a first principle, we should consider the needs of a religious, a priest or a pastoral worker, no different to those basic human and professional needs that all people have when they face the prospect of doing face to face work within what we call a pastoral setting. For psychologists, this field of practice is referred to as a clinical setting. For social workers, it is also a clinical or community setting. For teachers, it is a classroom setting. And for doctors, it is a clinical setting.

Each setting requires specific input of a theoretical and practical nature for the person to carry out their work. Work or ministry within the church is no different, notwithstanding efforts by some within the church to mystify or over-spiritualise work or ministry within this setting. My suggested emphasis on the similarities with other professions rather than differences is an essential key for the church to create new possibilities in terms of formation (both initial and ongoing). Conversely, if this artificial and unsustainable divide in understanding remains then we will continue to resist change and development, and thus operate within our own silo with all the consequences that emerge from such restraint (see the exchange between Justice McClellan and Bishop Heather) and out of a model of formation and training that has its origins in the 16th century.

In these briefing notes, I focus on the **training of workers such as priests and religious** (both initial and ongoing) and on the **setting for that training**. As with all other disciplines, the setting of that training is a significant part of the formation of the person. The input combines with the setting to create a milieu of practice that is highly influential on the future of institutions and the practice within those institutions, be they hospitals, universities, schools, social service agencies, private practice, or ecclesial communities.

2. SETTING FOR INITIAL FORMATION

- The setting influences how intellectual input is received, perceived and processed.
- It also influences how the material is incorporated into the life and behaviour of individuals.
- A closed setting creates a common experience and a common language and filters influences.
- A closed setting filters out difference and otherness, alternative thoughts and experiences and other languages.
- It also tends to filter out the alternative voices that are an important part of analysing perspectives and creating a viable and working way of seeing the world, the church, communities and individuals.

- A closed and protected environment may seem appropriate to train and culture a person into religious life or priesthood but there are potential, or even likely, negative outcomes:
 - The filtering out of alternative external influences that can positively assist the candidate in their discernment and formation
 - The filtering out of influences that challenge and test
 - The institutionalisation of the candidate into an unrealistic expectation of what church is, and what service in the church involves
 - The clericalizing of the candidate through institutionalisation and the use of symbols (e.g., clothing and practices) that stress otherness and a hierarchical order based on power and privilege.
 - The infantilising of the person through the unspoken notion that the church knows all that is required for good formation.
- Formation settings—in any religious institute or seminary—need to be as adult as possible and err on the side of exposure rather than protection, community integration and not isolation.
- Withdrawal as a dominant methodology, denial or avoidance of the world external to the formation program, the avoidance of error, and a goal of human perfection are antagonistic to positive human growth.
- Outside influences and alternative voices should be welcomed and encouraged.
- Exposure, challenge, error, transparency, communication, reparative action; these should be the core processes in the formative experience (cf Lewis 2000 – Repair after Rupture as an essential moment of growth).
- There should be a strong emphasis on communication in assisting candidates to grapple with what they experience in their:
 - Academic world
 - Relationships
 - Work life
 - Ministry experiences
 - Mistakes made
 - Changes and developments in the way they see the world.
- An emphasis on reflexivity and open communication, and on the valuing of alternative voices, is the way to deal with exposure.
- Houses of formation (seminary and religious) should be structured in such a way that they replicate the reality of the everyday situation of the people current in their chosen ministry and of people in the general community who:
 - Work & study
 - Shop, clean & cook
 - Recreate, keep fit, and socialise, build deep friendships and supports
 - Pray and experience quiet times
 - Receive professional support (supervision, spiritual companionship)
 - And struggle to fit all the complex demands of life into a busy week.
- Living a realistic and grounded lifestyle is critical to the avoidance of clericalism.

3. PROCESSES FOR INITIAL AND ONGOING HUMAN AND PASTORAL DEVELOPMENT

- A ministry version of a “cradle to grave” approach is required in respect of initial and ongoing formation.
- From the beginning of their candidature, candidates will understand that certain processes are necessary, helpful, healthy, professional and mandatory.
- These processes need to be viewed no differently to how other disciplines view initial and ongoing professional development. They are:
 - Imperative for preservice education
 - Necessary for ongoing education and the goal of best practice
 - Of assistance in the avoidance of burnout
 - Helpful in maintaining a focus on a healthy life and a healthy practice
 - A reminder and a support for self-awareness and professional boundaries
 - Mandatory
 - Essential to the maintenance of faculties (licence to practice).
- This will require a radical change of culture. There will be significant resistance to this approach. Cultural change will be very slow.
- Beyond the intellectual content and the experiential input, formation then becomes centred around four key areas where rigour is a key theme to the approach that is taken:
 - Theological
 - Psychological
 - Pastoral
 - Professional
- From their earliest days in formation, a culture of openness and exploration, and personal and professional accountability, needs to be instilled into the culture of formation as central ways of thinking and practicing ministry.
- A number of processes must be put in place to bring that culture to the fore in terms of initial and ongoing formation. These processes are led by people with various roles in formation:
 - Local Mentor (priest-mentor in the local community in which the candidate is placed)
 - Community Support Team (specially chosen people within the community who assist the candidate, and who will ultimately be one of the groups that vouch for his readiness to practice)
 - Individual Pastoral Supervisor (an external supervisor who assists the person to reflect and analyse their practice)
 - Group Pastoral Supervisor (external facilitator who assists a group of practitioners to learn from each other within a peer setting).

This is over and above what is normally in place for the seminarians and members of religious institutes:

- Spiritual Director
- Formator
- Rector/Vice Rector
- First Year Director
- Academic Dean
- Lecturers

- Ongoing professional development continues the processes that are established in the first years of candidacy.
- Ongoing professional development includes:
 - Regular ongoing education sessions
 - Spiritual Direction
 - Regular Pastoral Supervision
 - Peer Group Supervision (where possible and available).
- What I am suggesting would take 5-10 years to implement completely.
- Regulating so that it occurs is the easy part. Bringing about cultural change in such a manner that those in ministry not only comply but fully and positively engage. This is by far the more difficult task.

4. RADICAL SHIFT IN SEMINARY AND RELIGIOUS HOUSE FORMATION: SOME SUGGESTIONS

- There are several “first principles” that should be a part of a radical shift in the formation experience of the seminary and any religious institute:
 - Formation should be located, primarily, within the community, and within a pastoral setting.
 - A candidate should spend most of their candidature within a community and pastoral setting
 - There should be a limited period each year that is spent within an institutional setting (the seminary)
 - The primary domicile for each candidate should be within a pastoral setting where work and study are combined.
- To be clear, if seminaries as an institution do exist then they should be places to visit for intensive aspects of formation rather than considered the normal domicile of the candidate who aspires to be a priest or religious.
- This does not imply that the candidate is immersed in ministry or even has a role in ministry other than what any lay person would have within the church.
- The candidate lives within a setting that approximates what their future life may be like, is proximate to the pastoral setting, is a part of the living community of a parish or ministry community.
- The core aims of this radical shift are as follows:
 - The focus is on de-institutionalising formation and candidates
 - The move aims to increase the reality base of the formation experience
 - A local community becomes an integral and central part of formation
 - It increases the inclusion of more grounded experiences as the dominant influence
 - It removes the quasi-monastic and Tridentine approach from the formation experience
 - It challenges the candidate to face the reality of their future life from the beginning.
- There would need to be appropriate boundaries established from the beginning, which make it clear the candidate is simply a student exploring possibilities in terms of vocation.

- The candidate would be a student while living within this environment, travelling to university or college like any other student.
- The student should be encouraged to do either all or part of a foundational degree within a public university with the emphasis in those early years on developing an understanding of:
 - The framework of society and of social institutions and processes: for example, civil society, law, democracy, human rights
 - Philosophy and psychology that focuses on civil society and the person
 - History that is not totally focussed on church
 - Other units that could assist in the development of the character of the person.
- The emphasis in these early years would be on:
 - Becoming compassionate and gaining an understanding of self and others
 - Experiencing diversity and difference
 - Broadening the person's understanding of self and others, society and community, strengths and suffering
 - A broad-based experience of academic learning
 - Relational learning
 - Community engagement
 - And based on the above, discerning a vocational direction.
- Incorporation in to any formal pastoral ministry would be slow and based on a developing maturity and on a developing understanding of role, practice and competence.
- There will be arguments mounted that this is not possible.
- The church can be creative and creative solutions can be found for the objections that are mounted.

5. PSYCHOSOCIAL CONTENT FOR INITIAL AND ONGOING FORMATION

- It is important that a dominant strand of learning for those engaged in ministry be an understanding of:
 - The person and human development across the lifespan
 - The place of relationships in human development
 - Sexuality and intimacy
 - Vulnerability, connectivity and resilience
 - The person and crises
 - Community development: dynamics and strategies
 - Minister as carer and in need of care
 - Ministering within a multicultural environment and with diverse population groups
 - Specific psychological issues that impact on individuals and communities: loss and grief; war and trauma; terrorism; domestic violence; sexual abuse; poverty
 - Pastoral counselling skills in working with individuals and groups
 - Professional issues and practical ethics.
 - The psychology of organisational leadership and support
- By way of example, see the unit outlines I have developed in two of these areas (already provided to the RCIRCSA).

- While there would be a difference between the content and process of initial formation and that of ongoing formation, the issues and areas of concern remain essentially the same.

6. BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON THE DIVIDE BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICES IN FORMATION

- Current practice does not seem to match policy and aspirations:
 - Some seminaries and some houses of formation appear to struggle with “doing things differently”
 - There is agreement on principles that reflect a new way of seeing formation but change is slow and practices don’t appear to match the aspirations
 - One major causal factor in this inability to develop new ways of seeing formation is the context of formation: a quasi-monastic and Tridentine environment
 - Formation tends to be insular, protective, monocultural and restricted, by and large, to assist the person to develop an understanding of the theory and practice of living and working within a church setting.
 - One consequence is that the thinking and behaviour of some seminarians, religious, and some newly ordained priests, tends to reflect an insular, monocultural and silo mentality.
- The psychological appears to be largely not understood, misunderstood, or given limited value.
- The argument appears to be that there are too many other important areas that need to be covered and so the psychosocial and the pastoral are relegated to a secondary position.
- My suspicion is that formators are themselves inadequately trained to provide a more balanced approach.
- Leadership within the church has not valued the psychological as an important element of formation.
- Induction into the institution, and into a hierarchical class structure, where priestly privilege is a part of the priestly culture, has dominated formation into priesthood and religious life even over recent decades.
- While this is not directly causal in the commission of crimes of sexual abuse, it does perpetuate a social milieu characterised by privilege and power that makes abuse, in a variety of manifestations, more likely.
- If the church is to grow through and out of this current crisis, then change must take place at the very core of how it conceives its personal and corporate identity.
- That will require a simultaneous consideration of radical changes to the formation agenda and the formation context.

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