A CENTRE FOR HEALTH AND INTEGRITY IN CHURCH AND MINISTRY

A Collaborative Research, Teaching and Practice Unit of the University of Divinity

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SYNOPSIS

- The Christian community and society in general have been rocked by revelations of sexual abuse of children within the parishes, schools, and other works of the faith community.

- Beyond the harm done through the criminal activity of some of its members, the Catholic Church has been criticised for its failure to protect children and vulnerable people, and for the adversarial approach it has taken with victims, which itself has done great harm: to victims and their families, and to the faith community.

- The Catholic Church, both here and in other parts of the world, is in need of repair and renewal after a devastating and humiliating experience of failure, and of rupture to the very fabric of the Christian community: to our children, families, communities, schools, and agencies assisting the vulnerable.

- The reputation and morale of good people has been damaged and at times shattered by the reprehensible criminal actions of some within the church.

- Educational bodies associated with the church have an essential role in helping the church to “understand where wrongs have occurred and so far as possible” helping to bring about “changes in the culture and management practices of institutions and the behaviour of individuals”.

- Research into various aspects of the pastoral life of the Christian community; education of pastoral workers, ministers and priest; mentoring of pastors; and training in the personal and professional aspects of pastoral ministry (such as supervision and critical reflection): these are all important tasks in the process of repair and renewal after rupture in people’s lives and in the church.

- A variety of academic vehicles exist to carry out a number or perhaps most of these tasks. The establishment of a Centre for Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry provides a clear focal point for understanding the damage that has been done, and for focussing on the needs of individuals and communities as they seek renewal after rupture.

- The task of repair and renewal after rupture cannot be undertaken alone, in a “silo” approach, within a single community of believers. It is beyond doubt that the many complex tasks to be undertaken cannot be done without the input of individuals and disciplines from outside the faith community and its academic institutions.

- A Centre for Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry needs to model health and integrity, transparency and openness, in its approach to research, the task of understanding complex pastoral issues, and the development of programs designed to support health and integrity in the Christian community and in ministry.
DISCUSSION PAPER

ESTABLISHING A CENTRE FOR HEALTH AND INTEGRITY IN CHURCH AND MINISTRY

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28 June, 2016 [29 August, 2016; 06 September, 2016]

BACKGROUND: A CHURCH IN NEED OF REPAIR AND RENEWAL

There can be little doubt that the 12th November 2012 will go down in our social and ecclesial history as a powerful and defining moment within the Christian community in Australia. This is especially the case for the Catholic Church, where sexual abuse within our faith community was causal in the announcement of that day. On that day the then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, announced that she would be recommending to the Governor-General the creation of a Royal Commission to examine issues of child sexual abuse that had been committed within institutions within the Australian community. On 11th January 2013 the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, issued Commonwealth Letters Patent appointing six commissioners to the newly formed royal commission. The commissioners were directed “...to inquire into institutional responses to allegations and incidents of child sexual abuse and related matters”.

Within the Christian community, and other significant institutional pillars of Australian life, a social and moral malaise developed over many decades around the protection of children. This malaise centred on our inability to protect children from the aberrant and criminal behaviour of some priests and religious—and to a lesser extent some laypeople. This abuse of the innocent and the vulnerable has had a catastrophic impact on individuals, families and communities. Although any understanding of the aetiology of such events is necessarily beyond generalisation, the sexual abuse of children involved significant and sustained breaches of sexual and physical boundaries on the part of priests, religious and laypeople.

1 At the first sitting of the royal commission, Justice Peter McClellan said: “Many Inquiries have touched upon the issues raised by the Royal Commission’s Terms of Reference. They number more than 40. In addition, there have been a very large number of Inquiries into these issues overseas. As the Royal Commissions and Inquiries that have been held in the last 30 years make plain, the community has come to acknowledge that fundamental wrongs have been committed in the past which have caused great trauma and lasting damage to many people. Although a painful process, if a community is to move forward, it must come to understand where wrongs have occurred and so far as possible, right those wrongs. It must develop principles which, when implemented through legislation and changes in the culture and management practices of institutions and the behaviour of individuals, will ensure a better future for subsequent generations.” Peter David McClellan et al., Formal Opening of the Inquiry: Wednesday, 3 April 2013 at 10.00am, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Melbourne: 2013).

within the church. It also resulted from the silence of many who knew of these breaches and for a variety of reasons chose not to act in a manner which prioritised the protection of children and other vulnerable people over all else.

Our Christian communities, across various denominations, have performed many exemplary and good works in education, health and social services over the last 200 years. This silent and yet insidious breach of trust has undermined the credibility of priests and religious, ministers and pastor, the hierarchy of the every church, and the leadership of specific institutions. Beyond the harm and loss of life caused by criminal acts, and beyond the silence of those who knew but did not act to protect, another tragic result is that the faith of not a few believers has been tested beyond measure.

The news and media outlets have been pushing and probing the behaviour of leaders within the church for many years. The media coverage is not always accurate but the revelations it has (and continues to) produce have been causal in the development of a greater social awareness of sexual abuse and the beginnings of change within the church. Paradoxically, the media attention has not always produced a negative perception of the church and its capacity to deal with sexual abuse.

The commentariat, a number of politicians, and civic leaders have noted, in a considered manner, the legalistic, adversarial, and harsh manner of the church in dealing with allegations and complaints. Allegations of “legal abuse” by the Catholic Church have been put in evidence to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. There is extensive academic literature which considers the impact of sexual abuse, and the

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7 Peter David McClellan, Helen Mary Milroy, and Andrew James Marshall Murray, Public Hearing - Case Study 8 (Day 60): Monday, 24 March 2014 at 10.00am, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Sydney: 2014); Morrison, "The Ellis Defence: How the Catholic Church Evades Liability."
possible negative consequences that follows if the victim reports their experience of abuse and, again, if the person seeks redress. It has been noted, both here and in Ireland, that the emphasis of the church was and is, at times, more focussed on covering up the ills of the church through avoidance and silence. It has also been repeatedly noted, even within the church, that the emphasis has been on protecting the reputation of the church rather than on the protection and support of victims.

The announcement of the royal commission, coming as it did at the end of a succession of complaints and a sustained resistance from at least one church leader, has resulted in a deep and sustained perception of corruption: of our ethical, social and spiritual base. While we claimed to proclaim the gospel, many individuals and sectors in society reached a point of barely tolerating what they perceived to be arrogance, hypocrisy and denial within a body they suspected was seriously flawed. Through a media storm, both here and in


10 Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, in an interview with Michelle Grattan, has indicated that discontent with the church and its approach to abuse matters has reached “…a crescendo. It’s a build-up of the angst, the anger, the hurt surrounding the whole issue of child sexual abuse, and the history of the Catholic Church, which has been a history of cover-up and a history of distrust. The lack of credibility in the church, felt across the community, not only by Catholics, but the community more broadly, has come to a crescendo.” Michelle Grattan, host, "Politics Podcast: Francis Sullivan on Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church," Politics with Michelle Grattan, The Conversation, 19 February, 2016; Barney Zwart, "Belated Change in Church’s Stance Was Forced on It," The Sydney Morning Herald, 29 May, 2013, accessed 19 June, 2016; Middleton et al., "The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.;” Paul Michael Garrett, "A “Catastrophic, Inept, Self-Serving” Church? Re-Examining Three Reports on Child Abuse in the Republic of Ireland," Journal of Progressive Human Services 24, no. 1 (2013).

11 Marr, "The Prince: Faith, Abuse and George Pell."

12 In 2012, the Victorian government received a report by retired Supreme Court Judge Philip Cummins, in which he said of the church: “There is a strong public interest in the ascertainment of whether past abuses have been institutionally hidden, whether religious organisations have been active or complicit in that suppression, and in revealing what processes and procedures were employed.” Quoted in, ibid., p. 3. Neil Ormerod, "Twelve Steps to Healing an Abusive Church," Eureka Street 21, no. 5 (25 March 2011).

13 Francis Sullivan indicates that the church is “highly protective of its position, and its contribution in various sectors of the human economy. So, by instinct it’s cautious and conservative. Now that instinct plays out in a protectiveness and defensiveness in its public image. And it’s taken many decades for the church leadership to
other countries, the Catholic Church was viewed as being the major perpetrator of harm to vulnerable individuals and communities.14

The establishment of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was to many a confirmation that something was seriously wrong with the structures and processes, individuals, and especially the hierarchy, within the church. In the hearings to date, the narratives of ruined lives have been tormenting and scandalous. We have been shamed, and rightly so. We have been brought low by the recalling of the tragic stories, and by the reprehensible and often criminal behaviour of not a few trusted individuals and groups within the church. As Walter Kasper indicated in a recent book on the theology of Pope Francis, “The cases of abuse...unleashed a shock wave and caused serious damage...” and as a consequence of this and other aspects of an ecclesial malaise, “the church was increasingly occupied primarily with itself; it suffered and moaned about its situation or occasionally celebrated itself. Its prophetic power appeared extinguished and its missionary vitality appeared to languish.”15

REPAIR AND RENEWAL AFTER RUPTURE

The Christian community has a long history of repair after failure and rupture and of renewal after devastation. And while there may be a temptation to lose hope, our history speaks loudly and convincingly of our capacity for faith, hope and renewal.

Renewal will only come about if and when we are able to recognise and accept our failure to protect and respond in a credible manner to the most vulnerable in society who tragically became our victims.16 Sorrow, unconditional apologies, restitution, a re-energised focus on protection, and ongoing support and care, are all precursors to strategic action aimed at ensuring that these gross failures of integrity in ministry never occur again.17

The strategies that need to be considered at this point are ones that ensure our ministers and workers do not repeat the mistakes of the past. Education, training, research, professional supervision, mentoring and other forms of support, pastoral reviews, and

realise that the defensiveness has been part of the problem; that putting the institution and its image first, avoiding public scandal, was their strategy. And now we’re left with the biggest scandal in its history.” Grattan, "Politics Podcast: Francis Sullivan on Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church."
14 David Finkelhor makes the important point that abuse of children is much more complex than often reported, where sexual abuse represents “no more than 10% of all the child maltreatment” cases reported in the USA, and that the focus on clergy child sexual abuse masks a much larger and more complex problem for children. See, Finkelhor, "The Legacy of the Clergy Abuse Scandal," p. 1226.
16 Garrett in his article makes the point regarding sexual abuse by clergy in Ireland that “the centrality of poverty and social vulnerability in the lives of the victims of abuse” further adds to the malicious nature of these crimes. Garrett, "A “Catastrophic, Inept, Self-Serving” Church? Re-Examining Three Reports on Child Abuse in the Republic of Ireland;" p. 43.
17 Henry Novello, "The Church's Lament: Child Sexual Abuse and the New Evangelisation," Australasian Catholic Record 92, no. 3 (2015); Finkelhor, "The Legacy of the Clergy Abuse Scandal."; Ormerod, "Twelve Steps to Healing an Abusive Church."
critical analysis within a pastoral setting; these are all important strategic tasks that need to be incorporated into a retrieval of a healthy church through a renewal of our integrity in ministry.

**The Academy needs to respond**

“Although a painful process, if a community is to move forward, it must come to understand where wrongs have occurred and so far as possible, right those wrongs. It must develop principles which, when implemented through legislation and changes in the culture and management practices of institutions and the behaviour of individuals, will ensure a better future for subsequent generations.”18

What role does an academic institution have in the repair and renewal of our Christian community after such a catastrophic rupture? Given the findings of the royal commission thus far, and of other inquiries in Australia, and a similar inquiry in Ireland, there is no option other than to explore this question and plot a path forward for significant engagement of the academy in the repair and renewal of the Christian community, and of the institutions that are central to the daily functioning of that community.

The various institutions of the Christian community, but especially the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and leaders of religious institutes, have a significant amount of work to do in order to repair the damage that has been done—to individuals, to communities, and to the social fabric of our society.19 The work of the Catholic Church hierarchy—and the leadership of other denominations—will be both significant and multifaceted: dealing with the past with openness, honesty, humility and sensitivity; healing and rebuilding in the present out of the ashes of global firestorm of abuse; creating a more positive future where abuse, in all its forms, is less likely to occur.

**Proposal: A Centre for Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry**20

What is obvious about the current state of the church as it pertains to our history of sexual abuse—and the loss of our integrity and a healthy milieu within the Christian community—is that a concerted, integrated and substantial response must be mounted. An authentic response to a gospel existence demands this of us. While others within the Christian community take responsibility for the historical offences and the rebuilding of trust, the

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20 It is important to note that in proposing, at least for discussion, the development of a “Centre”, I am not suggesting a physical space, a building, or any other form of costly structure. What I am suggesting is a virtual centre, an intellectual and pastoral space that becomes a focus for change and development, reflection and healing.
academy can look towards rebuilding health and integrity in our pastoral ministry. This means devising ways to rebuild from the ground up: a healthier education in pastoral theology and practice for priests and ministers; better pre-service training; positive mentoring and support; greater transparency and accountability; ongoing mentoring and pastoral supervision throughout the working life of pastoral workers, ministers, leaders and priests. These are the critical tasks that have failed to be addressed by the Catholic Church, with focus, rigour and determination.

The starting point needs to be positive: while it must be ever-mindful of the past, our approach cannot be negative or problem-based. While it must be clearly cognisant of the harm caused and damage done by such profound breaches of trust and acts of criminality, the work of the academy—through or in conjunction with a Centre for Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry—must emanate from a belief that healing and change can occur, that goodness exists within the church both within individuals and within the structures, that grace builds on nature, and that resilience and good practice can be nurtured, protected and strengthened to bring about health and integrity in our church and ministry.

A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH, TEACHING AND PRACTICE UNIT

There are a variety of academic vehicles that exist to carry out a number or most of these tasks. Different groups within the church touch on the issues mentioned in this paper and aim to deal with some or even all of the pertinent matters. I would argue that more is required and a clearer focus is needed.

Public confidence, both within and outside the Christian community, is best served when people can see a clearly focussed effort on matters of great significance; and at this time of our history I would argue that this is one of the greatest matters of significance facing the church today. The establishment of a Centre for Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry provides a clear focal point for understanding the damage that has been done and the needs of a community searching for repair and renewal after rupture.

It is beyond doubt that there are many complex tasks to be undertaken in this field. The task of repair and renewal after rupture cannot be undertaken alone, in some form of “siló” approach, or within a single community of believers. Many churches beyond the Catholic world have had to deal with similar issues of concern. It therefore makes sense to urge a process of collaboration between denominations and faith traditions. It also makes sense to seek to make this collaborative effort one that reaches across academic institutions and across multiple disciplines. In other words, while such a centre may be located within the University of Divinity, other academic institutions—who likewise view this matter as significant—may be keen to join forces in the establishment and workings of such a centre. A multidisciplinary approach is required and that will also focus our attention on various forms of collaboration.
The focus of such collaboration, while being open to a gradual unfolding of purpose, methods and outcomes, also must be focussed and clear. I would suggest that there are a number of clear focal points for such a collaborative venture:

- **Research**: by academic staff and HDR students on issues relating to health in our church and integrity in our mission.
- **Teaching**: through the development of specialised units and courses designed to upskill students and practitioners for their professional work as leaders, pastoral case workers, ministers and priests.
- **Mentoring**: through the development of courses and reflexive programs aimed at mentoring students and practitioners, supporting their ministry, and assisting with their efforts at professional accreditation.

The federal government, through the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, funds the “Cooperative Research Centres Programme”. This program may provide some useful ideas if not an opportunity to seek funding for this important initiative. There may be other pathways for funding that may be considered.

A Centre for Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry needs to model health and integrity, transparency and openness, in its approach to research, the task of understanding complex pastoral issues, and the development of programs designed to support health and integrity in the Christian community and in ministry. The development of a centre which focusses on these core issues and values can assist the Christian community—and other faith traditions if the collaboration extends to that point—to regain a clear experience that we have learnt from the gross errors of some and that we are determined to build a healthy church that lives out the gospel with integrity.

**FURTHER EXPLORATIONS**

If the leadership within Yarra Theological Union consider this a proposal worthy of discussion and assessment, then I would like to suggest that once we achieve that initial agreement that this Discussion Paper (or a subsequent iteration) be further circulated to key individuals within, and outside, the University of Divinity in order to gauge interest and test the viability of such a proposal. I don’t believe this discussion should be rushed; however, I do believe we need to begin it, and begin it soon.

[Version 4 – 09 September, 2016]

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REFERENCES


Coles, Jan, Adeline Lee, Angela Taft, Danielle Mazza, and Deborah Loxton. "Childhood Sexual Abuse and Its Association with Adult Physical and Mental Health: Results from a National Cohort of Young Australian Women." Journal of Interpersonal Violence 30, no. 11 (2015): 1929-44.


