

The Moral Issues of our Moment

Reflection 4: Keeping our Community a Safe Place – A work that never finishes

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In the current moral and social issues which we are facing – whether they be voluntary assisted suicide, same-sex marriage, freedom of religious practice – the Catholic voice, without doubt, has been severely compromised by the disclosure of the sexual abuse of children within our community. We see this, for example, on social media where comments made by bishops about the issues before us, are met, unrelentingly, with counter-comments calling into question the right of the Church to make any comment at all on moral matters when its own lack of morality has been exposed in such a shocking way. Our Church in no small way has suffered from an historical hubris that has now been shattered. It is difficult to call others to morality when our own morality has been found wanting.

One of the most difficult things for us is to accept the truth of ourselves. We are both gifted and wounded, both as individuals and as communities - even as communities of faith. How often we can seek to use one side of the ledger to downplay, or ignore the other! We struggle to accept our reality, and so we try to escape by constructing an ideal of ourselves that does not admit we stand in constant need of the forgiving and healing word of Jesus. However, as we grow we become more comfortable with our identity in all its dimensions – its grace and its sin - and we might even begin to recognize that the wounds we carry can be a source of blessing for us. The late Australian Jesuit poet, Peter Steele, remarked once, that authentic spirituality consists in letting it come home truly and deeply how things are, and responding out of that situation. As true as this is for us as persons it is also true for us as communities, and as a Church. We recognize that we, too, as a Church are caught up in a process of conversion, moving from darkness to light, from death into life.

The disclosure of sexual abuse of children and of vulnerable adults in our community of faith has given this spiritual insight special edge. We have been forced to admit that our community is deeply wounded, and that the appeal to the great goodness undertaken by many in our Church does not absolve us from the acknowledgement of a scar that is not simply the outcome of the crimes of some, but which suggests problems with our systems and culture. We must confess our reality; we stand in need of forgiveness and healing. We stand before our society, and especially before those who have experienced abuse in our community, with hearts that are contrite and full of sorrow.

It is not sufficient to feel sorry, however. For conversion is not a way of feeling; it is a way of acting. To accept our wound, fully, and with realism, is to become free to hear the call to change. Therefore, as I indicated in my appearance at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse at the beginning of February, the reflections undertaken at the Commission can only be the beginning of a much more sustained conversation required in our Church about better building cultures of safety. Safeguarding is a term that has come to the fore to express our responsibility both to maintain our community as a safe place for children and for vulnerable adults, and to promote a culture within our community that places the safety of others always before us.

This commitment must be engaged on several levels. As a Church, we have been forced to acknowledge the enormous challenge of bringing consistency in practices of safeguarding over the 75 autonomous entities in Australia that constitute the “Catholic Church.” The Commission’s hearings identified the need for a stronger national Professional Standards body than is currently envisaged. It also identified the need for transparent and accountable annual reporting of statistics related to claims of both abuse and sexual misconduct. And most importantly the Commission wrestled with

what kind of civil structures might ensue for greater professional accreditation, accountability, and supervision of clergy and Religious.

The Royal Commission placed clergy under special scrutiny – and rightly so. Clergy have had in the past extraordinary access to children. It has been an access given on trust, and it is a trust that, sadly and shamefully, has been criminally abused in many instances. Today, much stricter protocols exist regarding priests and children. Codes of professional behavior such as “Integrity in Ministry” – a document of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ National Professional Standards Office - clearly stipulate that a priest is to avoid ever being alone with a minor. Even the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a child should be undertaken in such a way that the liturgy is fully public.

Yet, beyond such boundaries, it is also critical for priests to develop a much greater awareness of the unique position in which their ministry places them, and to be mindful of the accountability that comes with this. It is frightening for me as a priest to recognize the extraordinary projection that young children place upon me. Coming to Mass regularly, seeing me on the sanctuary performing ritual action, it is natural for them to identify the priest with God himself. This may be an inevitable phase of an infant’s religious imagination, but it is not difficult to appreciate the most dreadful harm created should this projection be violated. Both to extend encouragement to children in a way that nurtures their faith, and at the same time to negotiate a child’s projections with professionalism, places a very significant responsibility on me as a priest – and it is an imperative about which one must be constantly mindful. However, it is one about which we all must be aware, so that our children are formed into a proper understanding of the priest and his ministry as maturely as possible. Throughout the Royal Commission we have often heard the criticism of ‘clericalism’ – a practice of ministry that is underscored by a priest’s sense of entitlement and exemption. Pope Francis himself rallies against the sin of clericalism in the heart of priests. However, the sin of clericalism can also exist in the heart of a community which may not place proper accountability on its clergy. In the face of this, I take this opportunity to thank you for the remarkable trust you show me in respect to your children. It is always a delight for me to meet them, to show interest in them. It is a special joy when they come running up to me and want to show me a sign of affection – something speaks volumes for your own regard of me. I do not take this regard lightly. May you never cease to hold me accountable to your regard of me, because only then will our children continue to be safe in our community of both people and pastor together.

The requirement to change, therefore, is not simply something that can be left to persons and organisations beyond us. It is a demand that must also be engaged by us locally. Jodie Crisafulli, the Manager of our Diocesan Office for Safeguarding and Professional Standards, asked me recently, “If a person comes into Holy Name church today, what do they notice differently as a result of the recent Royal Commission, from when they entered the building 30 years ago?” It is a challenge that must be heard by us all. Our own Parish takes its obligation to comply with recent legislation which has introduced mechanisms for screening of adults working with, or involved with, children. This is an important way of creating safer communities. However, such mechanisms are not sufficient in themselves. We must actively work to create a culture of safety. Subsequently, we have already initiated in our own Parish some simple means to convey how we seek such an environment. For example, you may have noticed at the entrances to the sacristy in our church a little sign extending a welcome to our parents of junior servers to be present in the room, assisting their children as they prepare for the celebration of Mass. Though our parents always have been welcome to do so, the sign itself is a tangible indication that we are community which prizes the safety of children. Over the coming months, we will look for more ways that make this commitment more tangible for us all.

Children are the delight both of our families and our communities. When we gaze upon a child we are caught intensely between an immediate experience of the present and a heightened expectation of

the future, between a “fulfilled moment and the beginning of a new day.”¹ As another German writer, Jürgen Moltmann, beautifully expresses it,

Childhood and youth are . . . transfigured with the daybreak colours of the dawn of life . . . imagined childlike innocence, this image of the pure beginning, this world of unlimited possibilities – all this makes childhood the image of hope . . . and when we search for ‘the child in us’ it is because we long to open this wellspring in ourselves once more.²

In every child, God waits for us to stir again within us the sense of new beginnings, of fresh possibilities, of awakening hopes. In the wonder of children our concern gives way; in their excitement, our pressure is relieved; in their play, our compulsiveness is disarmed. Every child is the sign of life’s hope of ever new beginnings. They are the future in anticipation. Is it surprising that Emerson once observed, that each child is the eternal messiah who returns again and again among fallen men and women, to lead us into the kingdom of heaven?³

Throughout this last week (3-9 September), National Child Protection Week has invited all Australians to play their part to promote the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. This year the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect has focused on the theme ‘Stronger Communities, Safer Children.’ As the Association proposes,

This theme emphasizes the importance and value of connected communities in keeping children and young people safe and well. Communities in which children are seen and heard, where their participation is valued and where their families can get the support they need are stronger communities which contribute to keeping children safe and well.⁴

The Royal Commission, itself, sought to do this by listening to the accounts of more than 1400 young Australians about their own experience of safety. It revealed that change for the greater protection of our most vulnerable will occur only as we respect them, ask what they are going through, watch what others are doing regarding them, listen to what they are trying to tell us, do what we are supposed to do for them, inform them about danger, and stand up and speak out for them. The National Committee for Professional Standards, a committee of the Australian Catholic Bishops and Catholic Religious Australia, has subsequently put before us the theme, “See Me, Hear Me” for this Sunday when we commemorate the importance of the safety of children in our community of faith. With what commitment do we take notice of our children’s safety? With what responsibility do we seek to ensure that our communities are places of safety for them?

As we allow these questions to seize us, and to galvanize us to tangible action, we might maintain our most treasured within a strong experience of connection, within the nurturing bonds of community - the caliber of that truly Christian community which the Gospel of Matthew proposes to us today.

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning: The life of hope*, translated by Margaret Kohl, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004, 8.

² Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning*, 10.

³ Cited in Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning*, 15.

⁴ NAPCAN: Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect, <http://napcan.org.au/ncpw/>