

## Response to abuse has been slow, stymied by Vatican

Chris McGillion | Dec. 5, 2012

Analysis

Sydney

The Catholic church in Australia is about to be put under the spotlight of the most sweeping inquiry into child sexual abuse ever conducted in this country.

Describing child abuse as "vile and evil," Prime Minister Julia Gillard said a national royal commission will examine the treatment of children in all churches, charities and private bodies. But it is clear that a major factor in her decision has been the mounting public outcry at ongoing scandals involving Catholic personnel and procedures.

These scandals include:

- Recent suicides of victims of sexual abuse by priests;
- Allegations of children dying in the care of Catholic institutions;
- Ongoing arrests and convictions of priests in relation to matters involving child sexual abuse;
- New allegations that some church authorities failed to report abusive priests;
- Claims by police in two state jurisdictions -- three states are currently conducting their own inquiries into child abuse in institutional care -- that existing church protocols fail to address the long-term interests of victims and that the Catholic church, in the words of one detective, "covers up, silences victims, hinders police investigations, alerts offenders, destroys evidence and moves priests to protect the good name of the church."

"Beyond the evidence of abuse," Gillard told a press conference, "there is also cause for concern that other adults who could have done something to make a difference to the lives of these children didn't do what they should have done, either by becoming complicit in people being moved around, for example, or by averting their eyes and by acts of omission."

Few observers of recent events and public disclosures could have had much doubt that Gillard had the Catholic church very much in mind when she made that comment and, interestingly, Sydney's archbishop, Cardinal George Pell, was the only religious leader with whom she discussed her plans before announcing the royal commission.

If what is to come proves extremely gut-wrenching for the Catholic church, it only has its leadership to blame: At a national level, the bishops were slow to respond to the mounting evidence of clerical sexual abuse through the 1980s and 1990s; at an even more senior level the Vatican has stymied the national response that eventually did emerge in the Australian church.

Back in 1988, the Australian bishops set up a special committee to examine the issue of sex abuse in the church

and to prepare a set of principles to govern the appropriate response to the problem. Four years later, the bishops issued a pastoral letter in which they acknowledged that mistakes had been made in dealing with abusive clergy in the past but it was almost another two years before the special committee made public a draft document.

That draft did make some courageous admissions: Sex abuse, it stated, "will not be stopped in a climate of deception, hypocrisy and lies," and the church had to commit itself to a "spirit of openness and truth" in dealing with allegations of abusive behavior. In cases involving children, the document insisted the church should "cooperate fully with child-protection agencies and the judiciary, not claiming preferential treatment" for any of its members suspected or accused of sexual offenses. The document concluded by arguing, "It is simply intolerable that we should degenerate to the extent of closing [the church's] eyes to the injustices which are destroying the foundations on which people build their identity."

At that time, however, the collective instincts of the bishops seemed to balk at an approach that was completely open to the problem of abusive clergy. And in the face of constant media exposure of clerical sexual abuse, it was another two years before the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference issued a formal statement expressing "deep regret" for clerical sexual abuse and adopting a plan of action promising the preparation of a code of conduct for priests, members of religious orders, and other church employees.

That code, titled "Towards Healing: Principles and procedures in responding to complaints of abuse against personnel of the Catholic Church in Australia," was finally approved in December 1996. It clearly stated in its introduction that this new way of dealing with abuse would "become credible only to the extent that it is actually put into effect" and that "if we do not follow the principles and procedures of this document, we will have failed according to our own criteria." Although church authorities claim that there has been no such failure since 1996, many victims say otherwise and their criticisms are now echoed by some police.

In 1996 the bishops also undertook to commission a study into the factors inside the church that might produce abusive clergy. That study, titled "Towards Understanding: A study of the factors specific to the Catholic Church which might lead to sexual abuse by priests and religious," was concluded three years later.

This was a bold attempt to drill to the core of the church's institutional culture. It found that clerical sexual abuse was a "direct consequence" of the failure of the Catholic church to treat men and women equally. "As long as the culture of the Church does not put men and women on a basis of true equality, then women and children will remain vulnerable to abuse," it argued. While the study found no evidence to suggest that the incidence of sexual abuse by priests and religious brothers was any higher than for males generally, it did find that the pattern of abuse was the "complete opposite" of that found in the general community, with boys more likely to be victims than girls. This fact it ascribed to occupational factors (many of the offenses against children were committed by clergy engaged in ministries that involved male environments), although it did acknowledge a consensus among those consulted in the study that the "arresting of human psycho-sexual and psychological development accompanied entry to the seminary or religious life directly from secondary school."

"Towards Understanding" also ruled out celibacy as a significant factor in contributing to child sexual abuse, although it did concede that attitudes toward celibacy (seen by many as simply "part of the package" of priesthood rather than a considered choice) may be a factor. It also found celibacy was inappropriate for a "considerable number" of clergy. The study was critical of images of God that emphasized notions of lordship and control rather than community and participation, and it criticized the all-male environment of seminaries and the "hibernation" of seminarians from psychological growth and authentic social interaction.

By implication, "Towards Understanding" was arguing that the culture of clericalism should be fundamentally reformed. Not surprisingly, the report was never made public, never acted upon in any serious manner, and, like

a similar report into the priesthood -- with similar findings -- commissioned by the U.S. bishops in 1971, effectively buried.

What had happened between 1996 and 1999 was a meeting in Rome in 1998 in which 13 of the 38 Australian bishops attending the Synod for Oceania were summoned by Vatican officials responsible for matters of doctrine, clergy, worship and the sacraments, bishops, religious orders and Catholic education. Three weeks after the meeting, a summary of its deliberations, known as "The Statement of Conclusions," was presented to all the Australian bishops to sign. Under the circumstances, they had little choice.

The statement referred to a "crisis of faith" in Australia and presented a blueprint for responding to it. The church "does not create her own ordering and structure," that blueprint insisted, "but receives them from Christ himself." Many of the subsequent prescriptions laid out in the document entrenched the clerical culture "Towards Understanding" was to criticize. The statement also, by implication at the very least, dashed any hopes the bishops might have harbored that they were free to act in ways they saw necessary to respond comprehensively to the problem of clerical sexual abuse. Since then, it has only been lone bishops who have dared to speak out on the need for reform or criticize the lack of a more forceful response from the church on the clerical sexual abuse issue.

Senior Australian hierarchs have welcomed the prime minister's announcement of a royal commission into child sexual abuse. The current chairman of the bishops' conference, Melbourne's Archbishop Denis Hart, said, "Our procedures that we have used since 1996 to address matters of abuse should be subject to appropriate scrutiny and that scrutiny has my full support and we will cooperate fully with the royal commission."

Likewise, Pell said that he believed "the air should be cleared and the truth uncovered" and also promised his full support. Other bishops have made similar encouraging remarks.

But these are early days. The precise terms of reference of the commission have yet to be decided. A royal commissioner -- or commissioners -- has yet to be appointed. The question of how long the commission will have to conduct its inquiry remains uncertain -- the Ryan inquiry in Ireland took 10 years to issue its report -- and the implications of a federal inquiry dealing with offenses that occur in state jurisdictions remains uncertain.

But it is no longer 1998, the royal commission has bipartisan political support, and the Australian public expects answers. Perhaps that will be enough to tilt the balance -- even in Rome.

[Chris McGillion is a former religious affairs editor for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. His most recent book is *Our Fathers: What Australian Catholic Priests Really Think About Their Lives and Their Church*.]

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