

31 August 2018



**Message from Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB  
Archbishop of Perth  
ACBC/CRA response to the Royal Commission**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am writing to you once again to share my thoughts with you as we all continue to grapple with the overwhelming tragedy of the sexual abuse of children and young people in our Catholic communities and institutions. In doing so I am deeply conscious that many bishops, including myself, have said many things about this terrible reality. However as I begin this letter I want once again to express my own deep shame and sorrow that so many people's lives have been so badly damaged by these terrible crimes. On behalf of the Catholic community of the Archdiocese of Perth I offer to all those victims and survivors of sexual abuse in the Church, and to their families and friends, my sincere and heartfelt apology. I understand that these things have been said before, and that words alone can never be enough. I continue to be determined to ensure, with the help of so many people around me, that these words will be backed up by practical action. It is this determination which lies at the heart of my desire to share this letter with you.

Some weeks ago I celebrated a special Mass in the Cathedral for representatives from our archdiocesan agencies. This is an annual event in which we acknowledge, celebrate and most importantly pray for all those who work in so many different areas of the extensive outreach of our archdiocese to the society in which we live.

While preparing my homily it became very clear to me that I needed once again to address with these key leaders in the archdiocese the shameful history of the Church in relation to the sexual abuse of children and young people. In the course of this homily I invited everyone present to reflect on the following:

*The Royal Commission has posed some difficult and uncomfortable questions for us as a Church. For me they all converge into one deeply disturbing set of questions: how could this possibly have happened? How did we manage to veer away so disastrously from those things which are at the heart of our faith? How is it possible that people who publically professed their commitment to Christ, and dared to preach him to others, could so blatantly betray him, or so comprehensively turn their backs on him?*

With the recent publication of the formal response of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) and Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) to the recommendations of the Royal Commission, and in view of the proposed national apology from the Prime Minister to victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, it is absolutely necessary that we as a Church continue to confront and be challenged by these questions. In this pastoral letter, which I offer to you not solely as a letter but as an invitation to prayer and meditation, I hope that you will find some help as you struggle to understand the tragedy which has engulfed the lives of so many. I would invite you to read it in conjunction with the statement from the Presidents of the ACBC and CRA which accompanies the release of the Church's formal response. It is made on behalf of all the bishops and religious including myself.

The Royal Commission itself, over long years of intensive investigation culminating in its final report and extensive recommendations, has been and will continue to be an invaluable tool in assisting us to grapple with the causes of this terrible tragedy. We must never allow ourselves to become complacent and think of this only as a dark past which, with the conclusion of the Royal Commission, is now behind us: it is also our present and an urgent demand on our future. Many survivors of sexual abuse, and their families, continue to suffer the consequences of the crimes





that were committed against them. We must as a Church, as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ, do everything we possibly can to help people move into a better future. That we failed to do this in the past only makes it more urgent that we do so now and in the years ahead.

At the same time we must continue to explore every possibility open to us to ensure that our Catholic communities, be they parishes, schools, hospitals, social welfare agencies or anything else, are places of absolute safety for our children, our young people, and indeed for everyone who comes in contact with the Church in any way. Our Archdiocesan Safeguarding Project is a cornerstone of our efforts and a symbol of our determination to make the present and the future so radically different from and better than the past. In this regard I would like to highlight two principles which are often stressed by Ms Andrea Musulin, the Director of our Safeguarding Project. Firstly Andrea reminds us that pedophiles will gravitate to those places where the children and young people are. We want to be communities of faith where our children and young people can experience the beauty, the richness and the promise of life lived with a consciousness of God's presence and God's love. Because this is our desire and our mission we have an absolute duty to do all we can to ensure that this is exactly what people do experience in our communities. Tragically, and shamefully, this was not always the case in the past. It is because of this that another of Andrea's principles is so important. We can never afford to "take off our safeguarding hat". This is true of every member of our Catholic community: our laity, our religious, our deacons, our priests and our bishops. We are all, together, the People of God. We must carry in our minds and in our hearts a constant awareness that vigilance can never be relaxed and complacency can never be allowed to grow.

In this regard I am enormously grateful to the generous and committed parishioners who have stepped forward to be the Safeguarding Officers in their local parish communities. Their physical and visible presence is a constant reminder of the central importance of protecting children in our communities. They are also a warning to those with evil intent that Catholic communities are now the most dangerous places for them to attempt to corrupt and harm the young. Our eyes are now open and our determination to root out this evil from our midst is uncompromising. We are now, in ways that we were not in the past, listening to and acting on the words of Jesus: *Anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith in me would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone round his neck*" (Matthew 18:6).

In the formal response of the ACBC and CRA to the recommendations of the Royal Commission we have either accepted, accepted in principle, or supported all but one of the 82 recommendations which relate directly or indirectly to the Catholic Church. While the one recommendation we were unable to accept – that which relates to the confidentiality of the Sacrament of Penance (Confession) – will be the focus of much discussion and criticism, this should not obscure the reality that the leadership of the Church has committed to acting upon all the other recommendations. A number of them have been referred to the Holy See as they concern matters over which the Australian bishops have no jurisdiction (changes to the universal Canon Law of the Church for example cannot be made by the bishops of Australia) but the majority of recommendations made by the Royal Commission have already been, or are in the process of being, or will be as a matter of urgency, implemented by the Church in Australia. In order to ensure that this happens the ACBC and CRA have jointly established both Catholic Professional Standards Limited and the Implementation Advisory Group. The former body, which is functionally independent of the Bishops and the Religious Leaders, will establish and monitor compliance with nationally applicable and compulsory standards for all institutions which seek to be, and are approved by the Church's leaders as, Catholic institutions. The latter body, comprising primarily lay people, will advise the Church's leadership on practical steps which need to be taken to ensure that the recommendations of the Royal Commission are in fact being implemented in practical and effective ways.

For myself as the Archbishop of Perth I want to repeat what I said in recent comments made available, at their request, to one of the local media outlets here in Perth:





*While the Catholic Church cannot change its teachings on the sanctity of the Confessional, including the absolute inviolability of the "sacramental seal", here in Western Australia, as throughout our country, the Church will continue to take every step available to it to ensure the safety and well-being, physical, psychological and spiritual, of every child and young person who takes part in the life of our communities.*

In my homily to Church Agencies, to which I referred at the beginning of this letter, I shared my own conviction about the challenge we are facing. I want to share that now with you.

*In asking these questions I am not for a moment suggesting that all the particular issues raised by the Royal Commission do not need to be carefully considered. Of course they must be. What I do believe, however, is that the terrible story of sexual abuse in our Church indicates a deep malaise within our Church, just as I believe that the widespread prevalence of sexual abuse throughout so many institutions in our society, including the most important institution of all, the family, points to a malign cancer at the heart of our society which should alarm us all.*

*All Catholics ... are being called at this particular time to have the courage to recognize how hopelessly inadequate, to borrow some words from St John Paul II, our witness to the gospel has been. For Pope John Paul, the explanation for this hopeless inadequacy was quite simple: we have failed to contemplate the face of Christ. We have failed to realize that unless the Church, deliberately and consciously and intentionally, refers everything it seeks to do and be to him, we will never even come close to being the Church, the community of disciples, Christ is calling us to be. If we try to build the house, which is God's Church, on shifting sands, rather than on the solid rock of Christ who is the only foundation for the Church, then the fabric of the Church will continue to unravel, to the shame and dismay of us all.*

These reflections arise from my own grappling with the question: *how could this possibly have happened?* We must, and we will, give careful consideration to all that the Royal Commission has revealed. We must, and we will, look at our structures and, where we can, reform and even abandon and replace them if they are contributors to the horror of sexual abuse. We must, and we will, face the hard questions about the dangers of an unhealthy culture of clericalism, about the lack of episcopal accountability, about the ways in which our approach to the theory and practice of celibacy may have contributed to this disaster, about the undervaluing of the role of lay people, and within that the role of women, in the life of the Church, and about so many other matters which have surfaced through the years of the Royal Commission's work. As Pope Francis said in his recent letter to the People of God *"it is essential that we, as a Church, be able to acknowledge and condemn, with sorrow and shame, the atrocities perpetrated by consecrated persons, clerics, and all those entrusted with the mission of watching over and caring for those most vulnerable"*. The Royal Commission's exhaustive work will help us to do just that.

We must also, I firmly believe, recognize that focusing on the issues identified by the Royal Commission alone, vitally important though it is to do so, will not lead to the renewal of the Church which the present moment calls for. We must have the courage to acknowledge that, for a long time, the Church in Australia (and of course not only here but in other places as well) has been going through a deep spiritual crisis which ultimately points to a "de-throning" of Christ from his rightful place in the Church. Our rhetoric may have been unimpeachable but our practice has sometimes been anything but. It is time for us, as a community of faith, to recall the words of Jesus:

*It is not those who say to me, "Lord, Lord", who will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven ... everyone who listens to these words of mine **and acts on them** will be like a sensible person who built his house on rock. Rain*



*came down, floods rose, gales blew and hurled themselves against that house and it did not fall: it was founded on rock. But everyone who listens to these words of mine **and does not act on them** will be like a stupid person who built his house on sand. Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and struck that house and it fell; and what a fall it had!"* (Matthew 7:21).

The time has come for us all first of all to listen, deeply and attentively and constantly, to the words of Christ, as they come to us in the scriptures, the Book of the Church, and then, having listened, to faithfully and courageously act on what we have heard. The time has come for us all to decide whether or not we will accept that the way we must follow is Christ's way; that the truth to which we must commit ourselves is Christ's truth; and that the life we must strive to live is our life in Christ. Those who have abused children and young people, and those who have protected the abusers, even if in doing so their intention was to preserve the reputation of the Church, were not walking in the Lord's way, were not following the path of the Lord's truth, and were not living according to the model of Christ's life.

Saint Francis of Assisi, whose name the present pope bears, once heard a voice while praying before a crucifix in an abandoned and derelict church: *Go and repair my Church for it is falling into ruins*. Perhaps we are facing a similar invitation today. Saint Francis responded by stripping himself of all but the essentials, and by gathering around him a community of people who, in different ways, sought to live in fidelity to the gospel. In many ways it was as simple as that. The abuse of children and young people represents an appalling case of infidelity to the gospel. The failure of bishops and other Church leaders to respond with courage and determination has been an equally appalling case of infidelity. Only by a renewed and uncompromising determination to live as faithful disciples of Jesus within the community of his Church can we hope to prevent further abuse of children, young people and vulnerable adults. This is not a task which falls only to the bishops, the clergy, the religious or those who work in ministry within our communities: it is a task which we all share together. We need to discover again the call of the gospel. We need to recommit ourselves again to a faithful following of Jesus. We need, in the vivid image of Pope Francis, to become a community where people's wounds can be healed and people's hearts can be warmed – and therefore we need to learn how to be healers rather than hurters, people who know how to warm the hearts of others rather than making their hearts grow cold. Only in this way can we become a people who are walking together in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd.

This is the fundamental challenge which now faces us as we seek to implement all those recommendations from the Royal Commission to which we have committed ourselves. We are, to paraphrase some words from Saint Paul, a people who hold a great treasure in the earthen vessels of our frail humanity (cf 2 Cor 4:7). It would be dangerous to continue along the path of renewal if we rely only on our own efforts. We must place Christ and his grace, given to us in and through our life in the Church, at the centre of everything. Only Christ can renew his Church – but he seeks to do so in and through us. And so we pray, in the words of one of the Church's Lenten hymns:

What we have darkened heal with light,  
And what we have destroyed make whole.

Yours sincerely in Christ

*+ Timothy Costelloe SDB*

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