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Australians debate seal of confession in cases of sex offenses

Chris McGillion Stephen Crittenden | Dec. 5, 2012

A statement by Australia's Federal Attorney General Nicola Roxon that the national royal commission into child sex abuse should look into requiring Catholic priests to break the seal of confession in cases of serious sex offenses generated much discussion inside and outside the church, even as Roxon tried to downplay the issue.

Roxon, who is responsible for setting up the commission, said that of far more importance was the failure to report to police known cases of abuse and "open secrets" that came to the attention of priests and church authorities by means other than the confessional.

New South Wales Premier Barry O'Farrell said that priests hearing confessions of pedophilia should be subject to mandatory reporting. "I struggle to understand ? that if a priest confesses to another priest that he's been involved in pedophile activities, that that information should not be brought to police," he told the state parliament.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard has said that she believes it is an issue that the royal commission should consider and one member of parliament has described the government's recognition of the seal as a "medieval law that needs to change."

Federal opposition leader Tony Abbott, Australia's most prominent lay Catholic and a close associate of Pell's, said priests have a duty to report abuse even if that means breaking the seal of confession.

A priest hearing confession is bound by canon law not to reveal what he hears even to save his own life.

At a news conference responding to the announcement of a national royal commission, Cardinal George Pell of Sydney said that the seal of confession is "inviolable." The only ground he would give was when a priest knew beforehand that a penitent was an abuser: In such cases, Pell said, the priest should refuse to hear the confession.

The retired auxiliary bishop of Sydney, Geoffrey Robinson, who is a vocal critic of the way the church has handled clerical sex abuse cases, said that he would break the seal for the "greater good" and report a confessor to the police if he believed there was an ongoing risk of further offenses.

But Robinson also conceded that requiring priests to break the seal -- even if they were prepared to do so -- would make little difference. "Offenders in this field, in pedophilia," he said, "do not go to confession and confess."

Robinson also said that the pope was unlikely to be responsive to any attempt to change church practice when it came to sacramental rites.

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