

Australian bishop launches petition for council on sex abuse

Jamie Manson | Jun. 5, 2013 | Grace on the Margins

In a press conference with international media Tuesday, Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson formally launched [a petition](#) [1] asking Pope Francis to call a council on the global clergy sex abuse crisis.

Robinson, a retired auxiliary bishop from Sydney, created the petition in conjunction with the release of his latest book, *For Christ's Sake: End Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church?for Good* [2]. The book, like the petition, calls on the church hierarchy to confront the systemic causes, like moral immaturity and the celibate culture, that have contributed both to the abuse and to the bishops' woefully inadequate response to the crisis.

The petition arrived at an especially heightened moment for the subject of clergy sexual abuse in Australia. This year, two state governments -- the New South Wales and Victoria -- and a national level inquiry, known as a Royal Commission, began inquiries into how institutions, including the Catholic church, have responded to abuse of minors. The Royal Commission began last month taking testimony for victims in private sessions.

Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, Oceania's highest-ranking Roman Catholic cleric, was subjected to nearly five hours of questioning during a parliamentary hearing May 27. In course of his testimony, [Pell claimed](#) [3] that a "fear of scandal" and a desire to "respect the reputation of the church" led to the decadeslong cover-up and insisted that individuals, not the church's structure, were to blame for the mishandling of sex abuse cases.

But no matter how well these government inquiries brings to light the bishops' mishandling of abuse cases and makes recommendations, Robinson points out that it is not equipped to investigate and remove the root causes of abuse and has no jurisdiction over the church worldwide. Only a council, he argues in his petition, can make the changes necessary to eliminate this epidemic and prevent it from plaguing the church's future.

As of Wednesday, the petition has garnered more than 19,000 signatures. Days before the launch, I had a phone interview with Bishop Robinson. Below is the text of our conversation, which has been edited for clarity and length.

What was your reaction to Cardinal Pell's testimony before the Royal Commission?

One thing I'm trying to avoid is allowing the media to set up a confrontation between Cardinal Pell and me. That being said, the cardinal did testify that there is nothing wrong with the structures or the setup of the Catholic church. The fundamental difference between us is that I believe we must search out the causes and the contributing factors to abuse, and we must eradicate them. And in doing that, we must follow the argument, wherever it leads. Whereas for Cardinal Pell, all the church's teachings are set in stone, and you may not even question them.

This belief, that the pope and the bishops are the only opinions that count, is really what my new book is about, and the whole point of my petition is that the views of 1.2 billion Catholics do count.

What motivated you to approach the issue through a petition?

The petition offers an opportunity for Catholics to speak up and call for more radical and comprehensive action. It is an attempt to give them a voice and to enable their collective voice to become so powerful that it will be heard loud and clear in the Vatican. It is the laity's children who have been abused or put at risk, so they have every right to make their voices heard and speak their peace.

Your petition sounds hopeful about the new pope.

He's made a lot of good noises and done a lot of nice things so far. He has said that when we consider the poor and injured, we must give a particular place to victims of abuse in the church. He also promised that victims of abuse will be present in a particular way in his prayers for those who suffer.

But Pope Francis still has to face the big questions. The biggest of them all, it seems to me, is sexual abuse. All he seems to have done so far is endorse what Pope Benedict did, and that doesn't go far enough.

What are you calling on Pope Francis to do?

In this petition, I'm asking him to set up a council. Big changes in the church can only come from two sources: the pope or the bishops in council. So if the pope wants serious change, he needs to set up a council if he is truly to confront everything involved in sexual abuse. That was the lesson from John XXIII and Vatican II: John alone could not have achieved everything the council did.

The petition suggests that laity should be involved in this council.

The [Code of Canon Law \(212\)](#) [4] states, "Christ's faithful are at liberty to make known their needs, especially their spiritual needs, and their wishes to the Pastors of the Church." And it goes on to say, "They have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their views on matter which concern the good of the Church."

When a lot of people hear the word "council," they think of something that looks at all aspects of the church. But you can have a council for one specific question. Vatican II spoke of "the holding of councils in order to settle conjointly, in a decision rendered balanced and equitable by the advice of many, all questions of major importance." The question of abuse is obviously of major importance because it is crippling the entire mission of the church.

How should laypeople be integrated into this council?

For every bishop, there should be a non-bishop. The council should take place not by bringing everyone to Rome with all of that pomp and ceremony, but by doing it through the Internet so discussions can take place in each country. I have an appendix in the book that spells out a model. I have little hope that it would be accepted, but at least it could get discussion going.

Setting up a council seems like a massive and potentially lengthy undertaking. Are there any steps the pope could take more immediately to address the situation?

Every bishop before he is ordained has to take an oath of loyalty to the pope. The pope could say to bishops of world, This is a shocking revelation of abuse, and we're going to do everything we can to fight it. He could tell every bishop in the world that since they've taken an oath of loyalty, part of that oath must be to reach out to victims. So that if they don't reach out to them, they would be breaking their oath of loyalty to the pope.

This is an approach I wish John Paul II had used 25 years ago. It would be very powerful. It doesn't mean that every bishop would follow, but it does mean that the oath, which the bishops take so seriously, would work in favor of victims, where until now it's worked against them.

The Catholic people have shown they simply do not want to have any bishops who have caused the abuse of a minor. The pope could also remind bishops that there are two problems: the abuse and the response. He could call on all bishops whose decision or lack of decision has led to a minor being abused to offer his resignation.

What are other ways for the pope to empower laypeople to become part of the solution?

The pope can create a system inviting people to come forward. Here in Australia, we created "contact persons." These are ordinary laypeople to whom we gave sufficient training that listen to a victim's story sympathetically and put it down on paper. We have a special hotline that directs victims to meet with a contact person in a safe venue to tell their stories. Until you have that kind of system and publicity around it, you're not going to know if you have a problem in your diocese or not. The pope could ask that every bishop have in his diocese a system where victims could come forward.

For more than two decades, you have been outspoken about taking decisive action to confront and eliminate abuse. But you are in a minority of bishops. What keeps others from speaking out?

In a chapter of my book, I talk about moral immaturity. There was a particular bishop back in 1983 who completely mishandled abuse cases. His concern was not with the victims, but with what the pope says and what the letter of the law says. He couldn't look at the situation and say, "This is awful. I don't care what the pope says, I'm going to respond to this." He was incapable of taking that level of responsibility for his actions. That's why, in this council, we need to cover two subjects: the cause of abuse and the causes of the failed response.

Why do you think your petition will get the results so many have been fighting for over the last three decades?

I have great hope that if enough people in the Catholic church speak up, a people power movement would be underway, like we have seen in the overthrow of the Marcos regime in Philippines, or the overturning of apartheid in South Africa, or the Arab Spring. The people in Rome can say no to me, they can squash me like a bug, but they can't say no to millions of Catholics.

I can see two big difficulties in this: Millions of Catholics are unhappy with response to abuse and want decisive action, but there is apathy, and while they'll think the petition is a good idea, they won't get around to signing it.

The other challenge would be that there are a lot of Catholics who are not used to telling popes what to do. I'm not presenting the petition as a confrontation with Pope Francis. I want to work with him and to show him that the Catholic people are with him and will give every assistance to help him confront and eliminate sex abuse.

What keeps you hopeful?

Cardinal John Henry Newman, before he became a Catholic, wrote to a friend, "There is nothing on this earth so ugly as the Catholic Church and nothing so beautiful." We've all seen the ugliness, and abuse is one of the ugliest chapters of all, but I've also seen the beauty, mostly in all of the good people I've worked with over the years. I don't want to just walk away and leave that beauty behind. So I'll work to overcome the ugliness wherever I can.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied

Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA).]

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