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Australian archbishop to abuse commission: 'We have reaped the harvest of horror'

Stephen Crittenden | Dec. 14, 2013
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Archbishop Mark Coleridge's statement to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse on Wednesday about the mishandling of child sexual abuse could be the strongest a serving Australian bishop has made.

Describing the sexual abuse scandal as a "tsunami that blew up out of nowhere," he said bishops and heads of religious orders had been caught like "rabbits in headlights" when confronted by sexual abuse cases in the 1990s.

Coleridge was appointed archbishop of Brisbane in May 2012 after spending five years as archbishop of Canberra-Goulburn. He is also a member of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, set up to coordinate the Catholic church's response to the Royal Commission.

Referring to the case of Joan Isaacs [1], who was abused as a schoolgirl in the 1960s by Brisbane priest Frank Derriman, Coleridge accused his own predecessor, Archbishop John Bathersby, of "spectacular bungling."

He also criticized Bathersby for failing to have Derriman laicised given that he left the priesthood in 1970 to marry and was convicted for the abuse in 1998.

"When I came to the diocese last year, there was a kind of a lack of focus and sense of urgency in this area ... too many loose ends, too much unfinished business," Coleridge said.

He said he initiated a belated process to have Derriman formally laicised and he expected an answer from the Vatican "sooner rather than later."

Last week, he wrote a letter to Isaacs, expressing his disappointment that her experience of the church's Towards Healing process, formed by the church to respond to complaints of abuse by the clergy, had been such a negative one.

"Too little, too late," Isaacs told the Royal Commission this week.

The archbishop told Commissioner Peter McClelland this was an "absolutely fair" comment. "It was a rather pathetic, belated gesture in some ways, but in conscience, I felt I had to do it."

Describing Towards Healing as a "work in progress," Coleridge said practices that were customary in the late 1990s, when the scheme was first implemented, would be judged "totally unacceptable now."

One of those practices was an overreliance by the church on lawyers and insurers, "all good and well-intentioned people, but in this case I think the failure of oversight led them to play a role which was most damaging," Coleridge said.

The confusion between the pastoral and legal elements of Towards Healing had been fatal, Coleridge told the Royal Commission. Indeed, he appeared to back a proposal for some kind of independent compensation scheme, funded by the churches, but independent of them.

One of the themes that has emerged most strongly during evidence before the Royal Commission this week is that of "invisible" bishops who pass their responsibilities for dealing with sexual abuse on to other senior clergy.

This week, the Royal Commission heard about two victims of sexual abuse who have participated in the church's Towards Healing program -- Joan Isaacs and Jennifer Ingham.

In both their cases, the bishop failed to attend their mediation session under Towards Healing, leaving a more junior representative to hear their stories and offer an oral apology. Ingham, 51, was abused by Lismore priest Rex Brown from 1978 to 1982. The bishop of Lismore, Jeffrey Jarrett, failed to attend her facilitation session even though she specifically requested it.

"This angered and confused me," Ingham told the commission. "I felt I deserved the respect to have Bishop Jarrett present and I needed answers from him."

She said she was told Jarrett could not attend because of his "fragility and difficulty in coping with facilitations."

In contrast, Coleridge said he would be "very strongly committed" to attending facilitations.

"The only two things that I could imagine would keep me away from a facilitation would be ill health or [being] overseas," he told the commission.

Coleridge was critical of the seminary formation of young priests in earlier decades.

"When I look back now, it was absurd. Human development, as we now call it somewhat demurely, didn't exist. It was just taken for granted," he said. "Well, of course, you can't, and we have reaped the harvest of horror because of that."

These comments were especially interesting in view of a line of questioning McClelland has been relentlessly pursuing with church witnesses all week.

Under current Australian law, the Catholic church cannot be held vicariously liable for the crimes of individual clergy.

But in a sign that this might change, McLelland's argument is that the church should share the responsibility and liability because it asks the public to come forward and place their trust in it, thereby providing "by its very structure" the opportunity for those individuals who breach that trust.

Speaking of the "poverty" of earlier seminary formation as a powerful cultural factor that had combined with personal culpability to create "a perfect storm," Coleridge seemed only too happy to help the commissioner's argument.

"His Honour has asked various witnesses about vicarious liability," he said. "... My own view is that insofar as there are these cultural factors in play -- and there are -- then it really does make sense to talk about some kind

of communal or vicarious responsibility or even liability."

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