

Genesis of the Group *For the Innocents*



Two books began our work - Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's *Confronting Power and Sex in the Church* followed by Chrissie Foster's *Hell on the Way to Heaven*. Robinson's immensely disturbing insight and the awful events endured by Chrissie and her family were a great shock. The passion of both books is deeply affecting and demands action.

So we just had to respond. But how? What could we do?

We knew some of the priests, bishops, archbishops and cardinal mentioned in both books through training for the priesthood. Of the trainees, some left before ordination, some left afterwards and some, with great dedication, continue as priests to care for people. Some of those who left remain within the church, some have left it and some have become atheists or agnostics. But as ever, mateship persists and some of us continue to meet and often reflect on the church in the modern world.

The concerns of many of us today are mainly:

- the failure to make any serious headway in dealing with the clergy sexual abuse scandal;
- the lost vision of Vatican II; and
- the remote leadership in the church whose pronouncements do not connect with good people's lives.

Members of the group have come to confront clergy sexual abuse via many pathways. Some are responding to their own abuse as children, some as near misses. All want change to occur. Some identify themselves firmly as followers of Jesus and his message of love. Others take a different view. Working out what to do is complex. How to balance the call for justice following human imperfection with forgiveness of the truly contrite offender?

The relationship the institutional church has with some of its members is often soured by a church representative in a position of authority carelessly shredding an individual's psychological and spiritual wellbeing, including often condemning them to hell at the same time. Such stories abound. Not only are these officials ignorant of the elements of "serious sin," but demonstrate a disregard for the Jesus message of love, forgiveness and encouragement. Thus the affected person, in anger and with a sense of injustice, joined with the incongruence that the morality practised is not the morality preached, resolves never to darken the door of a church again. And they don't.

What is more depressing is that even at the level of the hierarchy itself, one sees clergy like Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Ireland apparently being given little support from his fellow bishops. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson is treated similarly here in Australia to the point where he gives up and resigns his position, but not the church. Bishop Bill Morris was similarly officially set upon, with informed opinion decrying both his fate and its circumstance. Not even thoughtful, committed and caring people within the hierarchy seem to be able to discuss change in the church, never mind effect it.

The sad consequence is that for many, the church hierarchy appears to have lost moral authority and transparency. It is treated dismissively and with cynicism. The story of Chrissie Foster and her family and how she was treated by the hierarchy is horrific. The way Bishop Bill Morris was treated is an instructive example of even someone in episcopal office being abandoned in the cause of power and self preservation. In the eyes of many ordinary people, the perception is that the formal church has lost its way

The situation is pressing. Significant change is needed. “What can I, an ordinary person, do about clergy sexual abuse?”

With that all swirling round came the realization that members of the church are equally members along with the hierarchy. So speaking and taking action as part of the church is as open to us as it is to the hierarchy. For all its other faults, *Humanae Vitae* asserts “a right conscience is the true interpreter.” Our conscience is saying “speak up!”

The march across the bridge by ordinary people to apologize to aborigines for their past treatment was a significant event. The government at the time under John Howard was dithering, claiming they were not the actual perpetrators and thus had no responsibility. They were nevertheless throwing out baits of compensation and theoretical justice when brought protesting to the legal table. We felt proud that ordinary Australians had stood up that day and said sorry for what has happened.

So we can stand up as members of the church and as members of the human race without the need for permission from anyone. We can say sorry to those people like Chrissie Foster, her family and her parish for what has happened, for the abuse they suffered, not just that done by the perpetrators but also that done later by the authorities in the name of “justice.”

Thus was born the group “For the Innocents.” It has become firmly directed towards victims and survivors – the innocents – their families and immediate community. This is not to deny that all the other actions of reform are important and necessary, be they bringing perpetrators to justice, parliamentary enquiries or achieving transparency and accountability within the church. One may speculate on the likely success of such ‘official’ investigations and hoped for reform and how long they will take.

Many people are working hard to support the innocents. Not least are many pastoral bishops and priests. They have been working hard and long at this and, like many, feel frustrated with the current situation. For every one bad egg there are many doing the right and appropriate thing.

Will an apology work you might ask? We can only tell you what has been experienced so far. Having developed the apology, we have spoken on occasion directly to innocents. We say sorry for all that has happened to them, that what they and their families have suffered is not acceptable. At this point we become amazed and humbled at their response. Initially they are wary as could be expected. “Who are you and why would you be saying this to us?” becomes both their spoken and unspoken question. But when the content and the intention sinks in, they quietly come and express a palpably heartfelt thanks. Their response can be “I am so grateful you are taking the time to think of me/us.” “No one has shown such thoughtfulness of me like this before.” One battle hardened worker said “I realized how cold I had become in trying to deal with this issue. But listening to you I feel somewhat revitalized and feel the warmth of care coming back into my heart.” The family members of a victim was in tears that they and their journey was being recognized as they struggled with the unjust guilt they felt that perhaps they had not done all they could to protect their child or sibling.

Could we as a group, could all people of humanity and good will, have such an effect on those very needy and lonely people in every diocese of Australia that would make their healing more complete? There can be only one answer.

Our formal “Sorry” is contained in the document “An Apology – For the Innocents”.