

Healing for the Innocents – who will do the work of the Good Samaritan?

Bob Munro

Much is being written about religious sexual abuse with the Victorian state Inquiry under way and pronouncements about various Commonwealth and states Royal Commissions. There are awful statistics being put forward. There is much pointing at protocols and documents that are claimed to be in place, some breast beating about institutional inadequacies and so on. The press picks out the sensational elements and often fails to present a rounded picture of what has happened over a considerable period of time.

But what is actually being done for “The Innocents,” the abused, their families and the communities to which they belong? Is anything actually happening within the institutions? Do the abused feel they are being seriously considered? The answers by the innocents to these questions are mostly in the negative. So how will they get to experience the Jesus message of love and care that leads to healing? And just who is going to do this?

Many lay people and groups are quite rightly saying change is needed. There are calls for changes in the management of the Catholic Church from the top in the Vatican down to the diocesan level. Some consider the inquiries and commissions as the club to get change. But how long will it be before real change will take effect? What clues does history provide about likely future progress? Take Vatican II which concluded in 1965. Just what are the changes, 47 years later in 2012, that can be pointed to that have materially made a difference? What seems more newsworthy now are the “shooting one’s self in the foot” actions that take place on a regular basis.

Leadership is what is strenuously being called for. Current commentary about this however does not inspire confidence that this will be in place any time soon. Even our local pastors, with a very few exceptions, seem paralyzed. So who will lead? In this situation just what does our Baptism confer on us as ordinary people and what does it give us power to do?

The element that I would suggest that is the easiest to implement is to reach out to the abused and their families. Approached with an open heart and good will, action could commence at the parish level within a few months. That way, ordinary people would demonstrate they are putting into practice the Jesus message of love and care, the innocents would feel the support they so desperately desire and that would be the start of the healing process for them. With such action there would be a demonstrable reclaiming of the central message of our Christianity.

What would a plan for the healing of the innocents look like? Listening – plain and simple. Do I hear a gasp of incredulity? How has this conclusion been reached? In the group called “For the Innocents” which commenced just on two years ago we have listened to and been taught by the innocents.

Some of the members of our group are victims/survivors of clerical sexual abuse. Some are parents of the abused. Some are professionals who were set upon by the structures when they spoke up to try and protect children.

What those actually abused experience is pain, trauma, isolation and unwarranted guilt as a result of the actions of clergy, religious teachers or workers. Daily these innocents carry the legacy of criminal actions committed by perpetrators in positions of authority and power. Additionally, their awful suffering was then compounded by their subsequent treatment at the hands of some of the hierarchy

and church officials. These latter transgressions are just as serious, given the breach of trust those officials held in the name of us all, and despite the message they purport to proclaim.

Besides the individual, many others are affected by the consequences of that abuse. While there are some who have never told anyone, often there are family, friends and colleagues who have come to know what has happened. They too may carry a burden of their own pain and guilt as they judge themselves as having failed to act in some way to protect and support.

In the process of listening to these affected people, listening without almost any conscious effort on our part, what has been observed is that they are beginning to feel brighter. One such person was feeling just that much better that she decided to remove herself over time from the anti-depressants she had been taking for 10 years. Naturally she was a little unsure how she would cope, but with the help and support of all those around her, including family and friends, she began to experience feelings and emotions not felt naturally for quite a while.

On 7:30 Victoria recently another said “The more you talk about it, the easier it is for you to learn how to cope with all the bitter memories, the flashbacks and so on.” Being listened to, without judgement or advice, shows an unconditional acceptance of them and their story. Above all, it breaks into and helps them to deal with the greatest feeling they speak of – isolation. Listening however in these circumstances is not just a once off event. It requires constancy and availability because the damage is deep and can only be revealed and healed over time through built up trust.

Being heard is one thing. What justice looks like for the abused though is something else and will be expressed differently by different people.

At the same time it should be of no surprise that a just anger can erupt. “Give me a bulldozer to drive through the Oakleigh church” and comments like “I never want to go near a church again.” All of us are victims of this scandal, our faith and Christianity alike. The story of Chrissie & Anthony Foster in their book “Hell on the Way to Heaven” is a searing record of a family and what happened in what they originally considered as ‘their’ church. It is essential reading for anyone who wishes to take a pastoral approach in this area. But just as it is an individual who commits the transgression, so it must be an individual who reaches out to heal and restore.

Listening carefully to the innocents however, despite their skepticism that any good can now come from the church, what emerges is their deep desire to be genuinely heard and for their story to be accepted by their pastors. This does not seem too much to ask. When there is a genuine reaching out from someone who in their eyes officially represents the church and a real “sorry” is expressed, then a substantial healing commences.

We also need to remind ourselves of the fact that there are many good pastors out there who are faithful to their calling. If as at the Victorian Inquiry it was suggested that 1 in 20 had transgressed, as Des Cahill pointed out in his submission, that means that there are 19 out of 20 who are worth knowing and having as our pastors.

Can we who call ourselves Christian meet the challenge? Can we motivate, even demand that our bishops, priests and fellow pew members publicly reach out to these innocents and their families who have been abused and so unjustly treated?

Christianity itself is the victim of this scandal. To avoid the message of Jesus being further trashed we the ordinary people have to act and to act now. We cannot wait in obedience or deference for the

approval and/or participation of our pastors and bishops to take this action. We have no choice but to act out of the power and responsibility of our Baptism.

What will be the consequences of such action? Those who do act will know with certainty they have reclaimed and proclaimed the Jesus message of love and care. And what will be discovered in this process of healing is that there will have been an exchange of gifts.

There are many resonances with this issue that emerge from a quiet reflection on the parable of the Good Samaritan.

See the FTI site au.groups.yahoo.com/group/fortheinnocents/ and at fortheinnocents.com where the apology that can be made by ordinary people and a plan for healing can be found.



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