

OPINION: Don't block your ears to abuse, Mr Premier

By PETER FOX
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I HAVE investigated so many sexual assaults in my 35 years of policing I've lost count.

Having spent most of those years at the coal face I have seen the worst society can dredge up, particularly the evil of paedophilia within the Catholic Church.

I am not in an executive position or relying on statistics or reports being shielded from reality, I speak from first-hand experience with victims and their abusers.

It is not an easy story to hear and the reason so many cover their ears and turn away, I've visited victims in mental hospitals and listened to families tell of suicides. I have looked into their faces, seen their tears of pain, anguish and despair, listened to the hurt of betrayal and felt their isolation from not being believed.

We all hear the words "paedophile" or "child molester" but what do they really mean? The term "child abuse" sweeps over the acts sanitising images of this appalling crime. It's our inbuilt defence to protect us from those horrific images.

Listening to their stories, typing their statements, I relived their pain. I haven't blocked those images and they still haunt me. I visited them in psychiatric wards and saw the damage to their families. A solicitor from the DPP broke down reading one of my statements. The abuse was so abhorrent she asked to be relieved of the case. Is it any wonder people don't want to hear and turn away?

Victims are coming forward in ever-increasing numbers but they need our support. They need your support, Mr Premier. Police are making arrests but still the abuse goes on. It is not enough to say, "I welcome the police decision to arrest another person [priest] accused of paedophilia", when on average it takes 21 years to report these crimes and the priest continues to prey on more little children.

Often the church knows but does nothing other than protect the paedophile and its own reputation. It certainly doesn't report abuse as revealed by the current Victorian inquiry.

I can testify from my own experience that the church covers up, silences victims, hinders police investigations, alerts offenders, destroys evidence and moves priests to protect the good name of the church. None of that stops at the Victorian border.

Convicted priest Vincent Ryan was sent to Victoria when the church learned of his abuse, returning the following year after things cooled down to pick up where he left off.

Many police are frustrated by this sinister behaviour, which will continue until someone stops it. You have the power to do that, Mr Premier. The whole system needs to be exposed; the clergy covering up these crimes must to be brought to justice and the network protecting paedophile priests dismantled. There should be no place for evil or its guardians to hide. Then and only then will the arrests begin to slow, signalling fewer children are being raped.

It is no longer enough to just arrest the wrongdoer 21 years after the crime.

Removing the support that harbours these criminals is like cutting the head from the beast. It tears down the veil of secrecy behind which these vile animals operate with the self-assurance of immunity.

A priest once gave evidence that the church's handling of child sex allegations was under control.

That priest was named by victims as having allegedly helped to cover up the rape of children.

His name continues to appear in other matters. Clearly everything is not under control. Alarm bells are ringing.

I have many family and friends who are Catholic. My children attend Catholic schools so I am not anti-Catholic. I voted for you, Mr O'Farrell, at the last election so my call for a royal commission is not politically motivated. My reason is from the suffering I have witnessed and a desire to make it stop.

There are more than just the victims and their families who want to see a royal commission. I have spoken to teachers who no longer want to be intimidated and silenced. I have sat with a priest and nun who were so distraught they felt forced to leave the church when they couldn't remain silent. I have taken reports of ostracism and reprisals against victims' families for giving evidence against priests at trial. If this doesn't warrant a royal commission something is very wrong.

Apologising is not enough. Compensating victims for treatment is not enough. Mr O'Farrell, please don't block your ears. Many priests don't want a royal commission nor does the hierarchy of the church, but God knows we need one.

Detective Chief Inspector Peter Fox is a Hunter police officer with more than 35 years' experience in the force.