



# COIN

## COMMISSION OF INQUIRY NOW

Justice for victims of Catholic Clergy Sexual Assault in Victoria

The Hon Georgie Crozier MLC,  
Chairman, Family and Community Development  
Committee, Parliament of Victoria, Spring Street  
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

5th September 2012

Dear Ms Crozier,

**Inquiry into Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and other Organizations  
COIN Submission No. 13: Why victims are unlikely to come forward.**

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This submission concerns adult victims of childhood clergy sexual abuse and their likely reluctance to come forward and participate in the Parliamentary Committee's Inquiry. This issue has implications for the findings of the Inquiry into Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and other Organizations.

**Background** In COIN's Submission No 1, dated 1 June 2012, COIN expressed the view that your Committee's Terms of Reference, announced on 17 April 2012, are impossibly broad, so much so that the Committee is in danger of pursuing a broad-brush superficial and inconsequential Inquiry. In addition to this problem, I believe that the validity of the Inquiry's findings with regard to clergy child sexual abuse, will be further compromised, by the issues outlined below.

### Issues

1. The psychological literature devoted to the subject of trauma unequivocally indicates that most victims of clergy child sexual abuse draw a link between their life's hardships (influenced by the ongoing psychological problems) and their past childhood trauma, decades after their traumatic experience(s).
2. The traumatic memory of the abuse, for most victims is painful and shrouded in a deeply internalised sense of shame and self-blame. Most victims suppress their traumatic memory and often there is no one close enough to understand their circumstances.
3. Deeply harbored shame, disconnection from social contacts, and depleted emotional resources are the reasons why many victims do not come forward and report their complaints through the existing complaint processes *Melbourne Response* or *Towards*

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*Healing.* I believe that majority of clergy abuse cases remain unreported to the Church authorities.

4. I also believe, that the Church as an organisational hierarchy is aware of this tendency for the victims to live in isolation. For centuries, these symptomatic patterns of victims' behaviour have been exploited by the abusing priests and by the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, in a shared tacit knowledge that victims of clergy sexual abuse do not tend to come forward with their complaints, because of their psychological and social impacts, and the social stigma that these impacts carry.
5. This is why I believe that:
  - Any invitation, extended to victims of childhood clergy sexual abuse, to participate in the Inquiry, demands a carefully considered ethical framework; and
  - That any victim who would choose to participate in the Inquiry would firstly need to feel safe and trusting, in order to be confident that his or her submission will be accepted and treated with respect and utmost confidentiality.
6. I believe that a proper public campaign aimed at conveying these notions (i.e. safety, trust, respect and confidentiality) across to the potential participants, would be essential prior to the commencement of the Inquiry.
7. Understandably, your Committee does not possess enough resources at its disposal to launch a public campaign, subsequent to which an extensive amount of support would have to be offered to those who would choose to participate in the Inquiry.

### **Recommendations**

8. I therefore strongly recommend:
  - i. That the Inquiry is considered at this stage as a stepping stone to a proper Judicial Inquiry.
  - ii. That a Victoria-wide public campaign will be undertaken by the Victorian Government to offer support, safety, respect and confidentiality, to all victims of clergy abuse, prior to the commencement of the future Judicial Inquiry, which I and the constituents of COIN strongly believe is needed.



**Dr Joseph Poznanski**  
**Vice-President**  
**COIN**

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