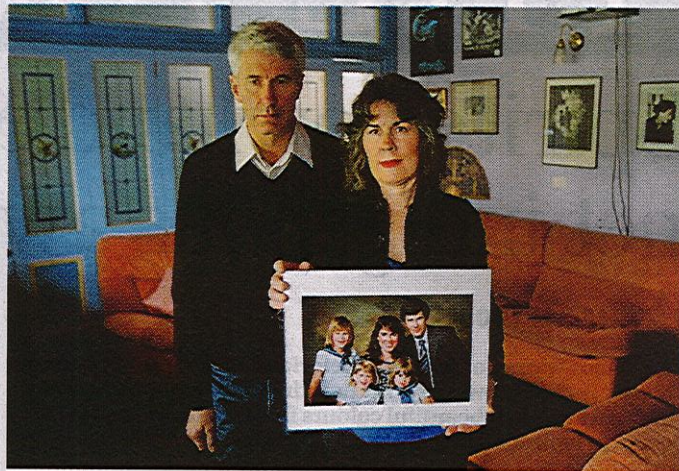


## OPINION FORUM



Chrissie Foster and her husband, Anthony, with a portrait of their family, torn apart by church sex crimes. PICTURE: CRAIG SILLITOE

## The silence of the cloth under siege

BY CHRISSIE FOSTER

**FORGET religion. Forget God. This is about the safety of children.**

The landmark Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children inquiry, headed by a retired Supreme Court judge, Philip Cummins, has made powerful recommendations about Victorian churches' handling of child sex crimes.

Citing the Catholic Church's system as an example of inadequate child protection, the Cummins report said: "Any private system of investigation and compensation which has the tendency, whether intended or unintended, to divert victims from recourse to the state, and to prevent abusers from being held responsible and punished by the state, is a system that should come under clear public scrutiny and consideration . . . Crime is a public, not a private, matter."

The inquiry believes the closed doors of the Catholic Church need to be opened. Recommendation 48 declares: "A formal investigation should be conducted into the processes by which religious organisations respond to the criminal abuse of children by religious personnel within their organisations. Such an investigation should possess the powers to compel the elicitation of witness evidence and of documentary and electronic evidence."

For a long time, victims and their families have been arguing for a royal commission on the Catholic Church's mishandling and cover-ups of child sex crimes. We were pleased with, indeed much relieved by, the findings of the Cummins report.

It is frightening that the church's so-called Melbourne Response, and the similar rest-of-Australia scheme ironically called Towards Healing, have been operating unchallenged by the state for 16 years. In that time the church has minimised payouts to victims and locked away the truth that could make for a safer future for children.

Church authorities keep the facts to themselves. But let us consider, on the evidence that is available to us, just how damaging these schemes have been.

We know that between 1993 and 2011, 65 Victorian Catholic priests and brothers have been convicted in the courts. A further 53 different Catholic priests and brothers have been involved in out-of-court settlements.

That is a total of 118 clergy offenders in Victoria alone. But 118 is not an accurate number. It is a minimum. Many more clergy offenders have eluded media scrutiny and still more have been secreted away in the church's self-serving internal systems.

Only the church knows the true number of offenders. It is time for us all to know.

The career paedophiles of the Catholic Church, who had trust, authority and access to endless numbers of Victorian school children, were living the dream of every paedophile. History tells us the only sanction paedophile priests faced if discovered to be criminals was relocation to another parish. Never laicisation. Never police intervention.

Sexual assaults are costly both to the child and society. Victims suffer directly, and taxpayers foot the bill in supporting and repairing these broken lives.

But the highest price of all is suicide. Clergy childhood sexual assault costs lives. Victoria Police investigations over the past 10 years have shown 35 suicides, most from just two clergy. There are other suicides from other clergy offenders; my daughter is one of them. Sometimes I wonder if these suicides are murder.

In July 2010 the Archbishop of Melbourne, Denis Hart, wrote a pastoral letter, stating: "Since 1996, we have introduced procedures to protect parishioners and children against sexual abuse, and processes have been

### ¶ The cries for justice for Victoria's children must be heard. ¶

developed and applied." But only seven months earlier, my husband and I had wanted to visit the shower room in the school hall where our paedophile parish priest had raped our five-year-old daughter. We learnt that, 20 years later, the priest was still the only person possessing a key to this secluded room.

Archbishop Hart's letter to parishioners also announced: "Seminarians are required to undertake study of the church's code of conduct for priests."

I had to wonder what effect the church's "code of conduct" — mere words on paper — would have in deterring a paedophile.

In the past, no threat of the wrath of God from God's law, no threat of laicisation from canon law and no threat of prison from civil law — all words on paper — had ever worked.

But now, time is up for the church. The cries for justice for Victoria's children must be heard. The state government must say yes to a state-led inquiry, as called for by the Cummins report.

Our state must protect our children. We must have a royal commission now.

Chrissie Foster is the co-author of *Hell on the Way to Heaven* (2010).