



The church has failed victims of clergy. The state must not

BY **CHRISSIE FOSTER**

WHERE are the Victorian government leaders brave enough to say the age of deference is over and enough is enough? A royal commission will not bring back the lost lives of two of my daughters or many other victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, but it will help prevent much further suffering.

The Catholic Church is one of the richest and most powerful organisations in the world. Australia is no stranger to its influence, power and wealth. Recently, Cardinal George Pell stated: "Australia is 26 per cent Catholic and we are now the largest denomination, having passed the Anglicans. He went on: "We have a huge network of services; we educate 20 per cent of all Australians in our schools, operate 23 per cent of hospitals, we provide 55 per cent of palliative care."

The Catholic Church is one of Australia's biggest property owners, enjoys tax-free status, is the biggest single employer in this country and receives the support of weekly donations from its 1500 parishes.

Children are small and vulnerable, they have no real power. They cannot vote, have limited vocabulary, cannot organise a union to represent them. Their word holds little authority. They are reliant on others for food and shelter. They are easily intimidated. They cannot lobby the government. And they are considered unreliable witnesses in court. In the eyes of those who sexually assault them, all of this makes them perfect victims.

Our society continues to hear disturbing revelations of sexual assaults and rapes from brave survivors, who were attacked and silenced by criminal clergy. If these courageous people did not speak up, child rapists such as Father Gerald Ridsdale, Father Michael Glennon and the many other Catholic priests convicted in Victoria would have been left in parishes to reoffend.

The church had no hand in the arrests and convictions of their collar-wearing marauding priests, even though the hierarchy knew in many cases they were employing violent and prodigious sex attackers.

We must not turn from understanding the extent of the suffering caused by "sexual abuse" — a term that masks and softens the cruel and criminal reality of childhood sexual assaults and rapes, often repeated over many years.

This insidious crime is carried out in seclusion and secrecy. Nobody sees the assaults; they are, of their nature, well planned and executed. These innocent children are silenced through guilt or menacing threats from their priestly offenders, cowards bent on protecting themselves and enjoying and prolonging their illicit sex. The manipulation and destruction of young lives is of no concern to the rapist.

It is no wonder countless victims have not survived the torment that can last for years and causes the disintegration of their very being.

The state government owes these Victorian children an independent investigation into the institution that allowed paedophile priests to retain their access to our children. The government should stand up for the young

people whose lives were and are destroyed. Victims deserve the right to tell their awful stories to an authority capable of righting the wrongs inflicted on them by an institution too arrogant and powerful to hear their desperate voices or feel their tortured existence.

We, as a country, need to protect the victims, who were set upon as children. We want and need to protect the children of the future — the church has shown, repeatedly, that it does not care.

In the face of all the well-documented cases of knowledge of abuse and cover-up by the church, our elected representatives allowed and continue to allow it to operate money-saving, legally minded, in-house systems of meagre cash handouts and sham apologies. These systems were installed by the very hierarchy that failed to protect children in the first place. They were created and implemented by people with vested interests in protecting the church, its public image, its property and its future income. Victims' protection and justice came dead last.

In short, the church seeks to corral victims back to itself and bind them there.

Many victims who go through what the church has set up and accept small cash sums in lieu of proper legal, let alone moral, justice do so because there is nowhere else for them to turn.

In this country, the church cannot be sued because it refuses to offer a litigation model to accept civil claims. It prefers to legally not exist. These systems and legal invisibility have saved the church many millions of dollars in Australia. The global church has not been so lucky in other countries, such as the United States, where laws are different, and Ireland, where accountability is imposed following government inquiries.

When the church in Australia is questioned about its systems of handling clergy sexual assaults and rapes, we often hear a public statement made. Something like, "we are happy with the system". No wonder.

When there is no state inquiry into an institution that causes so much harm to children, the further damage done to these victims festers in the worst possible way. The hurt and distress it produces mutates into alcoholism, drug addiction, self-harm, dangerous living, broken hearts and minds. And more suicides. Are paedophile priests getting away with murder by way of their victims' suicides?

All these victims have are their stories. We must listen to the soft voices of survivors. The state must listen to them and not look away. The full extent of what the church has done — how it managed its offenders, how it now mistreats those embattled survivors, and what it still must do to properly protect children — needs to be exposed.

Our government and the Attorney-General of Victoria have the power to enforce our human rights and civil law. An inquiry is needed to protect us all — children included. Years and lives have been wasted. Act now.

Chrissie Foster is the author of *Hell on the Way to Heaven* (Bantam Australia, 2010).