

Bishop Ron Mulkearns

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Ron Mulkearns is my cousin. I was the deacon at his episcopal consecration in late 1968 and his first ordination to priesthood in May, 1969.

In the regrettable situation in which my cousin finds himself as he nears death I want to stand with him and honour him while also wanting to stand compassionately, sorrowfully and respectfully with people who have been hurt by his decisions and actions in the Ballarat sexual abuse scandal.

My cousin is and always has been a thoroughly decent man. There is not an ounce of evil intent in him. I do not wish to excuse any of his decisions and actions that have caused immense pain to so many people, but I do want to expose the great injustice and hypocrisy that is being cloaked over as this and other cases of bishops handling sexual abuse are investigated.

Behind Ron Mulkearns looms the Institution he gave his life to. That Institution groomed him in loyalty to its cause from his earliest years, educated him in the 40s and 50s en route to priesthood, further educated him in Rome to be a Canon Lawyer, and appointed him at a young age, with virtually no parish pastoral experience to be Co-Adjutor Bishop in Ballarat, a diocese to which he did not belong. He eventually succeeded an elderly bishop and found himself immersed in a typical clerical old boys' club. I know he found this difficult. And I know he did look to older minds for advice, especially with regard to appointment of clergy.

Ron, to my mind, has always been somewhat diffident, shy, and not especially adept at socializing. But he was a Canon Lawyer with great loyalty to and trust in the Institution – why would the Institution look for any other requirements to be a bishop?

I recall a conversation I had with Ron sometime in the 90s when he was on a Vatican commission for Priestly Life and he would travel to Rome and elsewhere for meetings. I asked him whether priestly celibacy was ever on the agenda. He said that members of the group regularly put it on the agenda. Then what, I asked. Then Vatican officials always removed it from the agenda, he said. I was flabbergasted. Why don't you object, I asked. And his reply: "Well, they're the boss."

Rome must not be questioned. You do what Rome wants you to do – that's the role of a bishop.

Ron knew the drill. He accepted that Rome was "the boss" and not to be questioned. And there can be no doubt that when he found himself out of his depth both personally and episcopally with the reality of clerical sexual abuse that he turned to Rome for advice. And he also trusted the expertise of psychologists. He had to; he was out of his depth in this.

I'd love to see the correspondence with Rome. Wouldn't we all! But two features of Rome's dealing with sensitive issues are secrecy and protection of the Institution at all costs. Rome would cover its tracks – and still does so – while the bishop would be left high and dry in damage control when the dam walls broke open.

As I write these lines it seems unlikely that Ron, because of his illness, will face the Australian Royal Commission into Sexual Abuse again. But if he did, I'd like the Commissioners to explore two issues with him:

1. In his service to the Church as someone responsible for and adviser to Rome on Priestly Life, was celibacy on the agenda, what was the thinking of the other members of this group from around the world, how did Vatican officials handle the issue, and how did the academically qualified members of this group react to Rome's treatment?
2. When he became aware of the sexual abuse by priests in his diocese, what advice did he seek and what advice did he receive from Vatican officials on how he should handle the situation.

I believe that the Catholic Church in its governing processes is as totalitarian as any system of governance can be. Its control over thought and behavior is exceptional. I'm also well aware that every person is responsible for his or her actions. And while it's no excuse to say "They made me do it," there is at times and in some situations reason to pause, to consider another side of the story and not to dump harsh judgment on someone who is basically decent and make him the scapegoat for everything that went wrong.

The fact is that you do not become a bishop in the Roman Catholic Church without, in many cases, leaving your intellectual integrity at the door when you sign on for the task. You have to be on record that you will not support the ordination of women priests or contraceptive practices. You have to sign on to absolute surrender of intellect to what the Church believes and teaches – and that includes such questionable issues as humanity emerging into a state of Paradise, the literalness of the infancy and resurrection accounts in the gospels, the physical resurrection of Jesus, and that Jesus actually ordained and set up a male clerical Church before he died, to name just a few.

So now, let's look at the *real* issue underpinning the clergy sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. And that is the intellectual dishonesty, the hypocrisy, the violence and the moral bankruptcy of Institutional Roman Catholicism held together by secrecy, by bullying and by silencing – and until

recent years, rewarding those who engaged in these tactics to safeguard the Church's reputation.

Ron Mulkearns stands guilty of acting in accord with what the Institutional powers asked of him. I believe he so trusted the sacredness of that Institution that he was blinded and acted misguidedly. And I have no doubt he acted, relying on advice he trusted according to what he thought was right. And he now stands condemned for his decisions.

Now let's put beside Ron every bishop who knowingly and willingly signs on to be a bishop knowing full well he is in disagreement with some Church teachings but is prepared to keep quiet about it.

And let's put beside Ron every Roman Catholic priest who privately disagrees with aspects of Church teaching but will not say so publicly for fear of being silenced – or in the case of older priests, for fear of having their pension stopped by a mean-minded and mean-spirited bishop.

And way up near the top of the list let's put beside Ron all the academic Roman Catholic theologians and moral theology professors who dare not say publicly what they really believe on some doctrinal and moral issues for fear they will lose their teaching position in a Catholic university.

I mentioned violence. Bullying and silencing and intimidation are all violent – and this goes on in diocese after diocese where “yes-men” bishops seek to protect the Institution's power and authority by ensuring no informed, scholarly voices are raised on their watch that would question what Rome wants everyone to believe. Whatever happened to the gospel words, “The truth will set you free”?

And at the top. Let me put the cardinal who condemned Ron in no uncertain terms at the Royal Commission – a cardinal known for protecting the institution and reaping his reward from Rome with bullying and silencing tactics. The hypocrisy was awesome to behold and it pinpoints something that needs attention in this sad story: the institution gets off scot-free. It is not brought to trial, to examination, and ultimately to rightful condemnation. Not only that, it can, in the words of this cardinal at the Royal Commission, pompously condemn Ron from the high moral ground, see itself as pure and innocent as Snow White, and not look in the mirror and see the harm it

wreaks with the intellectual dishonesty and hypocrisy at every level of Church life.

And let's talk of betrayal. Ron would never think of betraying the Institution to which he devoted his life. The Ron I know would not think of publicly condemning its thinking, its advice or its actions. The Institution, however, hides behind its secrecy, and its tactics of self-protection. If it had any moral integrity or decency it would let the world know what advice it gave to bishops around the world in the 70s, 80s and 90s for handling clerical sexual abuse. It would face the world and proclaim: this is the advice we gave; if you want to condemn this man, then condemn us as well. We know that has not happened – and we know why. What does that say about the Institution's moral integrity?

There is every likelihood that the Institutional Church will wash its hands of Bishop Ron Muilkearns, deem him to be an embarrassment, and bury him accordingly. He will remain a person of dismay and even intense dislike for the victims of sexual abuse in the Ballarat Diocese, but behind this reality let us not lose sight of the other relevant issue: the hypocrisy, and the intellectual dishonesty rampant in the Roman Catholic Church. Who or what is also to blame in this shameful time of the Ballarat Diocese and other Dioceses? And when the time comes for accountability, let not the Institution escape blame for betrayal of one of its own. The damage of its totalitarian control over thought and behaviour, its paranoid secrecy, its silencing of critics – and victims of sexual abuse – its obsession with protecting its own reputation, and above all its extraordinary lack of compassion and its failure to act as Jesus would act – these are the issues that should be headlined, scrutinized, and condemned.