

# **Child Abuse Reported in confessional: Voices of children and families must be heard above all else**

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by Lindsay Wegener, Executive Director, PeakCare.

With the Archbishop of Brisbane declaring he will challenge any State laws that forced Catholic priests to report child abuse disclosed during confession, it's important the voices of our most vulnerable are not lost in the heat of battle, writes Lindsay Wegener.

THE voice of vulnerable children and their families must be heard as the fight between church and state threatens to spill out of the confessional.

The Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane Mark Coleridge says he will challenge any laws requiring priests to report child abuse disclosed during confession.

The Church is in one corner and the State in the other ready to fight it out.

Choosing a side and who to back may not be as clear cut as it first seems.

Many Catholic politicians and clergy struggle with where their loyalties lie.

Some may be wrestling with their conscience to not divulge confessed information in the same way lawyers might when maintaining privilege and defending clients they know are guilty.

The heavyweight contenders in the battle that's looming will be the State and the Church but the Law is also warming up outside the ring.

It can be a hard role to play even when lawyers are convinced that maintaining privilege is critical to ensuring the wheels of justice spin properly.

It would be a mistake to think this struggle and battle will be confined to arguments about what should or shouldn't happen in the confessional. It will also not be limited to the Catholic Church.

This tension simmers between all faith-based organisations and governments. It is especially true when these faith-based organisations receive grants to deliver services on behalf of the government to vulnerable children and families.

It emerges every time these organisation withhold services to someone that may not be seen as compatible with its religious beliefs and practice. And whenever it releases a mission statement or brands its services in ways that promote a religious message.

What rights or obligations, if any, does the State hold in insisting that taxpayer dollars are not spent in this way? What rights do faith-based organisations hold in insisting upon the freedom to maintain and openly declare their belief system and ethos?

Those likely to be stuck in the middle with the least capacity to be heard above the din will be vulnerable children and their families.

As the battle is fought out these children and their families have the voices that should be heard above all others. We must listen to them.

*Lindsay Wegener is the Executive Director of PeakCare, Queensland's peak child protection body*