



To the people of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne

A Pastoral Letter on Sexual Abuse

My Dear People,

We are all painfully aware that our Church is now going through a terrible time of suffering and self-examination. The full extent of sexual abuse by Catholic priests and religious continues to emerge, not only here in Australia but throughout the world.

Once again, therefore, I express my deep sorrow and offer a sincere and unreserved apology to all those victims who have suffered the pain and humiliation of sexual abuse and to their families.

The scourge of sexual abuse continues to cause great distress and in many cases a crisis of faith amongst Catholics. Every week seems to bring fresh scandals, as victims of abuse speak publicly of what they and their families have suffered.

As your Archbishop, I want you to know that I share in your desolation and sense of betrayal. The criminal offences and breaches of vows committed by some priests and religious bring shame upon the entire Church. How can we Catholics not be shocked and shamed?

With great humility we acknowledge that the crimes of the perpetrators have done great harm. We recognize that in the past we have not always dealt appropriately with offenders. We have had to learn from our mistakes, and continue to do so.

For me personally, this is one of the saddest times of my 43 years in the Catholic priesthood.

Sexual abuse in any form, and any attempt to conceal it, is a grave evil and is totally unacceptable. As Christ's Church we must face up to the truth of these revelations and not attempt to disguise, diminish or avoid in any way the actions of priests and religious who have betrayed their sacred trust.

Although it has been said that the incidence of Catholic priests abusing their office in this criminal manner is no greater than that which occurs amongst professional classes in the wider community, the community quite rightly expects a higher standard of morality for clergy. Sexual crimes committed by clergy involve not only criminality but also hypocrisy and the betrayal of their sacred office and of those who trust them.

The public is rightly concerned about the way in which Church authorities have responded to complaints and proven offences, especially where those involved are under age. For this reason you may find it helpful for me to describe what we are doing in the Melbourne Archdiocese. In 1996, we introduced the Melbourne Response as the most compassionate way of caring for victims.

In the past 14 years, about 300 people have been compensated as victims of sexual abuse within the Archdiocese. Most of the complaints relate to incidents from thirty and up to eighty years ago. We receive few complaints of abuse that has taken place since the 1970s.

We have sought to do everything in our power to bring these victims aid, consolation and, if possible, reconciliation with the Church. They have been given access to compensation, on-going counselling and medical support.

Victims have had the unfettered ability to take their complaint to the Victoria Police. Indeed, they are encouraged to do so. We do understand, however, that not all victims want to go to the Police. Nor do all complaints involve criminal offences that the Police can investigate.

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Of the victims to whom compensation offers have been made in accordance with the Melbourne Response, five have not yet accepted them. Eighty-six offenders have been identified over an eighty year period, of whom sixty were priests of the Archdiocese. Thirty-five of those priests are now deceased. I have acted in accordance with every recommendation of the Independent Commissioner under the Melbourne Response in relation to the remainder.

Of course, as a Church we must do more than provide justice to the victims of past sexual abuse. We must also work to prevent future abuse. Since 1996, we have introduced procedures to protect parishioners and children against sexual abuse, and processes have been developed and applied to deal with offending clergy. We ensure that there is rigorous screening of all people who aspire to the priesthood, and seminarians are required to undertake study of the Church's code of conduct for priests and religious on integrity in ministry.

We cannot completely set right the wrongs of the past or take away the anguish of victims of abuse and their families. Nevertheless I believe that the Melbourne Response goes a long way towards addressing compassionately the issue of sexual abuse in the Melbourne Archdiocese.

I know that some of you will feel estranged or disaffected from the Church as the result of the current scandals. I can only invite you to reflect upon the vast majority of our upright and generous priests and religious who dedicate themselves to the care and pastoral needs of their people and the decent and dedicated Catholics whose selfless work in the interests of children, the sick and the underprivileged daily speaks of a generous faith and of a faithful Church.

In this regard it may help you to know that institutionally, Catholic education, health and social welfare organisations make a vital contribution to the Victorian community. At present in Victoria there are 385 Catholic Primary Schools, 95 Secondary Schools and 9 Special Schools. We have 11 Hospitals, 63 Aged Care residential facilities and 16 Children's Welfare facilities.

In my reflections on the sexual abuse crisis, I have been much encouraged by Pope Benedict XVI who has never shirked the issue, and has been at great pains to apologise to victims. At World Youth Day 2008, Pope Benedict said in Sydney:

"I would like to pause to acknowledge the shame which we have all felt as a result of the sexual abuse of minors by some clergy and religious in this country."

"Indeed I am deeply sorry for the pain and suffering the victims have endured and I assure them that, as their Pastor, I too share in their suffering."

"These misdeeds, which constitute so grave a betrayal of trust, deserve unequivocal condemnation. They have caused great pain and have damaged the Church's witness."

"I ask all of you to support and assist your bishops, and to work together with them in combating this evil. Victims should receive compassion and care, and those responsible for these evils must be brought to justice."

"As the church in Australia continues, in the spirit of the gospel, to address effectively this serious pastoral challenge, I join you in praying that this time of purification will bring about healing, reconciliation and ever-greater fidelity to the moral demands of the gospel."

The Pope wrote in a similar vein in his pastoral letter to Irish victims of abuse and their families:

"You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry. I know that nothing can undo the wrong you have endured. Your trust has been betrayed and your dignity has been violated. Many of you found that, when you were courageous enough to speak of what happened to you, no one would listen."

The Pope has more recently described the sex abuse scandals as "a terrifying crisis" that comes from inside the Church – not from outside – and which requires purification and penance if it is to be overcome.

He has pledged that the Church will do "all in its power to investigate allegations, to bring justice to those responsible for abuse and to implement effective measures designed to safeguard young people in the future".

In the Melbourne Archdiocese, we can draw encouragement from the Pope's words.

In 1996, the Terms and Conditions of the Melbourne Response were formulated in consultation with Victoria Police. We are currently discussing with the Police how best we can continue to facilitate co-operation and assistance between the Archdiocese and the Police.

To those of you who cry out with Jesus from the cross, "Why have you abandoned me?", I re-dedicate myself and the Archdiocese to serve and care pastorally for all of the Church's people and the protection of all of its children.

At a time when our faith is sorely tested, let us remember together God's word:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1).

Yours sincerely in Christ

+ Denis J. Hart

ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE

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