

UPDATE 68

Royal Commission – St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol, Rockhampton



Wednesday 22 April 2015 – Day 7

The Royal Commission’s hearing into St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol continued in Rockhampton today (Wednesday 22 April) with Sr Berneice Loch completing her evidence about the Sisters of Mercy’s response to survivors of abuse at St Joseph’s Orphanage, Neerkol.

Sr Loch gave evidence that in 1996 the Sisters engaged abuse expert, Dr Robert Grant to help them better understand and respond to child sexual abuse.

Sr Loch told the Royal Commission it was important that all people associated with the Sisters’ mission attended and were part of the training.

“The leadership team had arrived at saying, ‘We need to take this approach’, but there was not really much point in having just five of us committed. We honestly needed our congregation behind us. We needed to talk with them so that we knew that they would support us. We could have been heavily undermined if most of our Sisters thought that what we were doing was quite silly or wrong or misjudged.”

Asked what the feedback from the Sisters was to the training, Sr Loch responded that many of them had quite shifted their understanding.

Sr Loch also gave evidence to the Royal Commission about the types of assistance the Sisters currently provide survivors, which she said included counselling, medical and dental expenses, assistance with accommodation, payment for education expenses for both, survivors and their families, transport and other items they needed.

Sr Loch said the Sisters current Response Coordinator provides job references for people for their employment and funds for legal advice. Assistance with representations to external bodies such as the Queensland government redress scheme and professional standards offices has also been provided.

Sr Loch said that access to the archives of the Sisters of Mercy has been provided to former residents, to help them trace their families and find other information.

“I would see that as a very important thing to make sure - our records are not extensive, but what is there can be very important to people.”

Sr Loch concluded her evidence by discussing a joint statement she issued with Bishop McCarthy at the start of the Neerkol hearing, in which both expressed their support for the work of the Royal Commission and their hope the hearing would provide some healing for survivors.

In the statement Sister Loch and Bishop McCarthy renewed their apology to the survivors of Neerkol and their families.

“I have been deeply moved this week and last week at the goodness of people who have come through very hard days; by their goodness and courage.”

Sr Loch said that acknowledging past failings and listening with an open heart is “the only way we can be the Church we're called to be.”

Ms Di-Anne Rowan, former Congregational Leader of the Sisters of Mercy Rockhampton, gave evidence about the establishment of support systems for former residents, training of the Order, and compensation paid to former residents.

Ms Rowan said that the Sisters had sold the St Joseph's Orphanage in early 2001, to fund compensation paid to more than 70 former residents who had taken legal action against the Sisters.

She said some \$500,000 in lump sum compensation was paid to the residents, with the balance of the funds from the sale of the Orphanage being used by the Sisters to fund ongoing assistance to former residents and the establishment and operation of the Sisters' Professional Standards Office.

She gave evidence that since the sale of the Orphanage more money had been spent on support and the operation of the Professional Standards Office than were received in the sale.

Ms Rowan said the Sisters of Mercy took the view that regardless of legal advice at the time, which suggested that legal claims could be successfully defended, they should do what was morally right.

Ms Rowan reflected on the effect of hearing of the abuse allegations and her reaction to the allegations. She wrote in a note in February 1997 that the Sisters “really feel for those who have been hurt. We want to offer support to victims of abuse, to listen to their experiences and to help them find healing for their hurts.

“I am sorry that our response at the time did not eliminate suffering. That is the reality. I am sorry that we were so naïve we did not realise how some people would take advantage of the children and abuse the system's trust.

“I encourage all the residents of Neerkol to tell their experiences. If any behaviour was criminal, then it should be a matter for the courts.

“We want to assure the residents of Neerkol that they will be treated justly. If they need support, we will try to provide it.”

Ms Rowan told the Royal Commission that those principles guided her work responding to people who came forward with stories of abuse for the remainder of her time as Congregational Leader.

Reflecting on this time, she said, “Working with those who had been at Neerkol was perhaps one of the hardest things I'd had to do ... But I would still consider it the greatest privilege to have been part of that to meet them and to work with them.”

Following Ms Rowan, the hearing concluded with evidence from Daniel Boyle, Consultant Crown Prosecutor from the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Queensland. Mr Boyle gave evidence about his office's consideration of prosecutions of charges against Fr Durham (who pleaded guilty) and Kevin Baker (who has not been convicted and denies the allegations).

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