

MEDIA RELEASE

Royal Commission releases final report into St Joseph's Orphanage in Neekol



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The Royal Commission has released its final report into allegations of child sexual abuse at St Joseph's Orphanage, Neekol in Rockhampton (Case Study 26).

The report follows a public hearing held in April 2015 which dealt with abuse at the orphanage between 1940 and 1975 and the response from the Sisters of Mercy, who operated the orphanage, the Diocese of Rockhampton and Queensland Government agencies.

The Commission heard evidence from 12 former residents who detailed the serious emotional, physical and sexual abuse by priests, nuns and grounds workers.

The Commission noted that in early 1997, the Sisters of Mercy formed a group to formulate processes and guidelines for the response to, and prevention of, child sexual abuse.

In a statement the Commission said it is 'satisfied the Diocese and the Sisters settled compensation claims with former residents despite legal advice they were in a strong position to defeat the claims because of the age of the claims'.

The Commission found that in many of the historical cases the Sisters and the Diocese lacked compassion in dealing with survivors.

It also noted however that both the then Bishop Heenan and the leader of the order, Sister Loch's lack of training in detecting and responding to child sexual abuse 'undermined their capacity to deal effectively with complaints of child sexual abuse by former residents between 1993 to 1996'.

In a joint statement from the Diocese and the Sisters of Mercy, current Rockhampton Bishop Michael McCarthy and Sister Loch commended the survivors who shared their heartbreaking stories at the public hearing.

'Our thoughts and prayers are with them and we hope the Royal Commission process may assist in their healing,' they said.

'We again reaffirm our apology to the survivors for the pain they endured'.

Since last year's hearing, the Diocese of Rockhampton has implemented a number of changes including the formation of a Child Safeguarding Committee to oversee all aspects of child protection within the Diocese, as well as the appointment of a Diocesan Child Protection Officer.

The Sisters of Mercy have built on the measures that we have made available to survivors since 1997 through the offering of a wide range of assistance and support to meet their identified needs. All relevant

policies and procedures have been reviewed and monitored to ensure they continue to reflect best practice.

CEO of the Catholic Church's Truth Justice and Healing Council, Francis Sullivan said the public hearing had been a difficult time for the survivors who gave evidence and for all others involved.

'The report acknowledges the work that has been done by the Sisters and the Diocese since the early 1990s,' Mr Sullivan said.

'Many survivors are living with the impact of the crimes they endured.

'But it is clear that when there is the will and the willingness for survivors and leaders of the church to work together then there is a real chance of reconciliation and healing' Mr Sullivan said.

The Commissioners also heard about a lack of Queensland government policies or procedures for reporting abuse and found the government had failed to adequately supervise and protect the children in the orphanage.

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