



## CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY

### **STATEMENT FROM HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL GEORGE PELL ON THE VICTORIAN PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY**

I am grateful for the opportunity to attend this important parliamentary Inquiry to explain the steps I took during my time as Archbishop of Melbourne to address the crime of the sexual abuse of children by Melbourne clergy and church workers.

#### **Victims of sexual abuse are my first priority**

I acknowledge again with shame and great sadness the pain caused by the sexual abuse of children and apologise again to all those who suffered abuse from Catholic priests, religious and lay church workers.

Along with other leaders in the church, I will continue to work to prevent sexual abuse in the church and to help those who have been abused. Victims of sexual abuse are our first priority. I am committed to preventing abuse and protecting people. Victims should be treated with compassion and provided with financial assistance, counseling and other pastoral support.

Our commitment to victims of sexual abuse also means working with the police and other civil authorities to ensure there are no cover ups and no protection of abusers so that Catholic parishes, schools and welfare services continue to be safe places for young people.

In many cases the harm that has been done by sexual abuse causes lifelong suffering. In some cases it has even led to suicides, a tragedy which fills me with horror and sadness both for those who have died in this way and for those who love them. Sexual abuse also causes great suffering for the families and friends of survivors, and we try to help them too. Over the years I have met one-on-one with a considerable number of survivors to acknowledge past wrongs and to work towards reconciliation.

Soon after becoming Melbourne's Archbishop I attended a prayer service and general meeting with numerous victims, families and supporters and advocates at the then Cathedral Hall at St Patrick's Cathedral, and later on two occasions I met with a significant group of survivors and supporters at two meetings in the Oakleigh parish. I was present when a small number of victims attended Pope Benedict's Mass in the chapel at St Mary's Cathedral House and joined with the Holy Father in speaking with them afterwards.

The harm caused by sexual abuse often runs deep, and sometimes these meetings have not been easy for anyone — particularly the victims and their families. But they are very important, including for me as a bishop. Often it takes considerable courage for survivors to come forward, and I am grateful for this. I am also grateful to those who support survivors to come forward for the help and encouragement they provide. I continue to be committed to meeting with victims and those who support them, and I am always open to doing so whenever it is likely to help healing.

### **How effective have church processes been in Victoria?**

Information provided to the Inquiry by the church in Victoria shows that the Melbourne Response and Towards Healing in Victoria upheld 224 complaints of sexual abuse arising from the 1970s, 82 complaints arising from the 1980s, 12 complaints arising from the 1990s, and 1 complaint arising in the decade from 2000. While there can be a gulf of many years between when a crime of child sexual abuse is committed and when it is reported, awareness of this terrible crime and public encouragement to report are probably at the highest levels they ever been in our community and this is a good thing. Certainly priests, principals and teachers in Catholic schools, leaders and workers in our health and welfare agencies and parents have a high level of awareness of the danger of sexual abuse and are alert to the warning signs. State child protection laws provide a further level of monitoring and assurance.

These facts provide clear evidence, and a basis for the Committee and the public to acknowledge, that things are very different in the Catholic community today from the 1960s and 1970s, which record the highest incidences of sexual abuse in the church in Victoria. While improvements are always welcome, the procedures we have in place now are working and have been effective in raising awareness of and in responding to the crime of sexual abuse in the church, and in assisting us to prevent future abuse. Thanks to the victims who have courageously spoken out about these crimes and also to the media, sexual abuse is no longer a secret; and thanks to enhanced laws, effective internal procedures, and much greater vigilance among church leaders, not least among the lay men and women in the church who work in this area or deliver services to children and other vulnerable people, there is no keeping it secret today.

### **Actions speak louder than words**

Like Archbishop Hart and the other Australian bishops, I have apologised on a number of occasions for these terrible crimes. These apologies are and were sincere, necessary and appropriate.

While apologising publicly and privately to victims and their families is essential, I recall seeing the sister of one of the Catholic victims in another state explain on television that deeds are more important than words of apology. I agree wholeheartedly that actions speak louder than words.

I have worked conscientiously for the past 17 years (since first becoming Archbishop of Melbourne and subsequently as Archbishop of Sydney) to help victims of abuse and to establish procedures and protocols not only to support victims but also to do all that we can to ensure church personnel are never again involved in abuse. The measures taken by the Melbourne Response and Towards Healing demonstrate clearly my determination

and that of the broader church in Australia to face up to the crime of sexual abuse and to act constructively to improve the situation and diminish the suffering of victims of abuse.

The needs of the victims must be our first consideration. When mistakes are made we acknowledge them, and we welcome suggestions for further improvements to our procedures. Our starting point is one of contrition and respect.

### **The establishment of the Melbourne Response**

When I was installed as the Archbishop of Melbourne on 16 August 1996, I was determined to ensure that processes were in place to respond to victims of abuse and that these processes were independent from the church. While the police are clearly best placed to investigate crimes and prosecute abusers, victims were also coming forward to church authorities. For this reason it seemed to me that the problem also required an institutional response, with clear procedures that provided assistance and certainty to victims.

At this time, the media was full of accounts detailing sex abuse in the Catholic community. As an auxiliary bishop to Archbishop Little I did not have the authority to handle these matters and had only some general impressions about the response that was being made at that time, but this was sufficient to make it clear to me that this was an issue which needed urgent attention and that we needed to do much better in our response. It was my job when I became Archbishop to address this problem within the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

In light of the urgent need for an effective system to respond to victims of abuse and the uncertainty at that stage about initiatives for a national response, I moved quickly.

Within one hundred days of becoming Archbishop of Melbourne, I had established the role of the Independent Commissioner and the Melbourne Response. In addition to the Independent Commissioner's work of investigating complaints and making findings, the Melbourne Response also involved the independent provision of counselling services at no cost to victims and compensation awarded by an independent Compensation Panel. The intention of the Melbourne Response was to make it easier for victims to seek financial assistance and counselling without the need for legal representation or to establish legal liability, and the findings of either the police or Independent Commissioner were not contested.

The Melbourne Response was set up after considerable discussion and reflection and after discussions with the Solicitor General and the Victorian Police. Although I wanted to act swiftly, I also wanted to ensure that the response was the result of careful thought and consultation.

There were very few models to follow at the time, either from elsewhere in the church or from government and other organisations. The idea for the Melbourne Response came to me from the-then Governor of Victoria Richard McGarvie, a retired judge of the Supreme Court, who suggested setting up a "Catholic Royal Commission", by appointing a senior legal person and giving him independence and the authority to make recommendations to the archbishop.

The Governor's suggestion was examined and discussed on a number of occasions by a distinguished board of advisers, and I also discussed the matter in some detail with Mr Jeff Kennett, then Premier of Victoria, who was very keen that decisive action should be taken.

To ensure the response would not conflict with police investigations or actions in relation to sexual abuse, The Victorian Police were consulted and closely involved in the process of finalising the response and the terms of reference of the Independent Commissioner. When the Melbourne Response was announced, the police issued a media release on 30 October 1996 welcoming the initiative, "as a positive step in tackling this very sensitive community issue" and specifically welcoming the appointment of Mr Peter O'Callaghan QC as Independent Commissioner.

I believe Mr O'Callaghan's work since his appointment in 1996 has proved he was the right person for this difficult and important work. By his training and whole life's work Mr O'Callaghan is scrupulously attentive to the demands of the law and natural justice, rigorous in his approach to evidence and proper procedure, and humane and compassionate to those who have been hurt or suffered injustice. He has brought all these qualities to his work as Independent Commissioner and helped hundreds of victims. I could not speak more highly of the integrity and professionalism of the Independent Commissioner. He has performed his difficult task very well.

We were also fortunate to have the assistance of some people of outstanding calibre on the independent Compensation Panel, who helped to ensure it operated in a fair and consistent manner. Alex Chernov QC, who was subsequently appointed to the Supreme Court of Victoria and is now Governor of Victoria, was its first chair, and subsequent chairs have included David Habersberger QC and Susan Crennan QC, who were later appointed to the Supreme Court of Victoria and the High Court of Australia respectively.

The Melbourne Response is first and foremost about helping victims. From the beginning, the Melbourne Response has provided counselling services to victims and, where appropriate, to their families, at no cost to them. Very few have complained to me that this service was not helpful. The service is a practical expression of compassion.

### **The future**

The crimes that were committed by priests and other church workers in the Catholic Church should never have occurred. The Catholic community should be one of the safest places for children and young people, and it is a major failure whenever a child has been hurt by a sexual predator in the church. We are serious about preventing these crimes and our efforts have had a good measure of success.

There is always more to be done and better ways of doing things. I look forward to the Inquiry's practical recommendations on how the law and non-government organisations' procedures can be enhanced and strengthened to protect children and vulnerable people. I am grateful for the important opportunity the Inquiry has provided for survivors to tell their stories and be heard and believed, and I wish the Committee well in bringing its immensely important work to its conclusions.

I renew my commitment to eradicating this evil from the church by continuing our work with the police and child protection authorities. I will continue my efforts to offer practical help and support, respectfully and compassionately, to those who are suffering because of these crimes. First and foremost I am on the side of people who have been hurt by sexual abuse. I always have been.

**Cardinal George Pell  
Archbishop of Sydney  
28 May 2013**

Appendix 3

