

6 December 2012

PASTORAL LETTER

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ

There have been many reports in the media about the Royal Commission into sexual abuse in institutions in Australia, including the Catholic Church. Some of you would have been disturbed by what you heard about such abuse occurring within the Church in Australia and even in our own diocese.

One of the saddest experiences of my time as a bishop these past seventeen years has been to meet up with victims of sexual abuse. I have done this on a number of occasions and I have always come away deeply saddened by seeing the terrible effect of such abuse on those who were harmed when they were young. Their trust was eroded and their bodies abused.

One of the most difficult discussions we have ever had at the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference was at a meeting in 1996. We worked hour after hour to put together all the elements of what has come to be known as our *Towards Healing* document. This covers the way we respond to victims of sexual abuse. During the day we came to the utter conviction that as a Church we would always need to put victims first, and never our own needs or the reputation of the Church. Following our meeting, the Leaders of Religious Orders and Congregations of Priests, Brothers and Sisters, also committed themselves to this same process.

The Bishops and Religious Leaders have tried to carry out those decisions faithfully for the past sixteen years. I am sure some Bishops/ Leaders have erred and that at times we have fallen short in some ways in our dealings with victims. However, I think all the reviews of our performance and the observations of objective observers would say that, by and large, we have been faithful to our commitment at that Plenary meeting of the Bishops' Conference.

During the coming Royal Commission the stories of some victims will be reported by the media. It will be disturbing to hear these kinds of stories. However, those who have been harmed have the right to be heard because they have suffered so much. At times they have not been allowed to speak out or not really felt listened to.

I wish that the Church community and particularly its leaders had been better in this regard than the general community. Sadly we seem to have offended as much as anyone else and responded as inadequately. As a bishop, I can never tell them enough how ashamed I am because of this, and I once more offer to any who have been harmed in our diocese by our personnel, my sincere apologies.

Please God we have learnt from the past and people are being treated better now and will be treated better in the future. However, the Church will never be free of sin. It has never been and it never will be because the Church is all of us and all of us are sinners; and some, at some time, will sin in a way that is terribly harmful to others.

I am not afraid of what the Royal Commission will find, and I welcome it as a chance for victims to be heard as they deserve in our Australian community. I also do not object to the Church being criticised for any failures of the past, and certainly for any failures that are found in the present.

I hope, for their own sake, that those who have been victims of abuse in institutions, communities and organisations other than the Catholic Church will also be heard, and that the Royal Commission and the media will give those victims the hearing they too deserve. This may contribute to the healing they so deserve.

My heart goes out above all to those who are not covered by this Commission but must be disturbed by all that is happening. There are those who have never told their story because it is too disturbing as it involves members of their family or their extended family. They think too much is at stake should they speak up. I would like them to know how sad I am for them and how willing I am to help them in any way I can. I would ask all of you to pray for and to support anyone you know who has suffered in any way at the hands of another, in whatever situation.

We have structures in place in the diocese which we hope will enable people to receive a compassionate and just response from the diocese. Mr Pat Mullins works on a Queensland level to respond to any calls of victims, or anyone who feels they have been harmed in any way at the hands of any Church personnel. In our own diocese we have Mrs Geraldine O'Brien as our Professional Standards Officer who works with me. This is to ensure, that once we are alerted that someone needs our response, we will respond completely in accordance with the commitments we made in our *Towards Healing* document. She and I are supported by a Consultative Panel of experts who again advise us to make sure we do not in any way allow factors, other than the requirements of those who are harmed, to influence us at their expense. Our desire is that the demands of *Towards Healing* are implemented completely in our diocese.

If you have suffered in some way, please do not be afraid to come forward. You matter more to us than our own comfort or our reputation. We want to respond to you in a way that can, even if only in the slightest degree, address your suffering.

This is not a time for the Catholic community to become annoyed because it is placed under scrutiny. We, and every other institution in Australia, deserve this scrutiny and I hope the scrutiny will be comprehensive. It is a time for us to continue doing what we do best, which is loving each other, loving our neighbours and continuing to offer the services that many good and faithful priests, religious and Church personnel have offered to the community ever since the Church first found a home here in Australia.

There is some confusion about the Church in media reports. Firstly, there is not just one structure of authority governing Catholics within Australia. There are many different authorities in the Church responsible for their own personnel. Leaders of Religious Orders and Congregations take responsibility for their own members. Each bishop takes responsibility for the priests of his diocese and the people who work in any ministry of the diocese. No bishop has authority in any other diocese.

Secondly, we will never violate the seal of confession by telling anyone what has been confessed during the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance. The confession was made to God and the priest has to honour that.

Please be supportive of the many good and faithful priests and religious, and others who work for the Church, who, at this time, may feel under intense scrutiny. They need to know that their commitment and service to you is valued in this current environment.

Do not let your judgement be clouded by the more colourful reports in the media. These reports cannot do justice to the total picture and should not be allowed to dominate your imagination or your judgement.

Let us pray for each other and for the work of the Royal Commission that it will act fairly, honestly and compassionately and achieve a good outcome for victims, especially our children, in the Australian community.

I am sure we will find that there have been failures because we are human, but thanks be to God we also are empowered by the Holy Spirit to get it right much of the time. We get it right when we do our best to be faithful to Jesus Christ whose grace will not fail us in this Year of Grace.

May God bless you all.

Yours in Christ Jesus,

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