

A PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENT and Apology from Bill Wright, Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle

Monday 01/07/2013

This public acknowledgement and apology has been prepared as part of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle's response to the Special Commission of Inquiry Concerning the Investigation of Certain Child Sexual Abuse Allegations in the Hunter Region ('Special Commission of Inquiry'). Bishop Wright does not speak for any other diocese, order or organ of the Catholic Church in Australia; this submission is his and that of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle ('Diocese') alone.



As Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle I wish to make an unreserved apology on behalf of the Diocese to all those who have suffered as a result of acts or omissions by members of this Diocese in relation to the matters before this Special Commission of Inquiry.

My apology must begin with an acknowledgement of the wrongs done. I acknowledge that two men, Denis McAlinden ('McAlinden') and James Fletcher ('Fletcher'), now deceased but once priests of the Diocese, repeatedly committed acts of sexual abuse of children.

I acknowledge that these sexual predators used their position in the Diocese to gain access to these children and to conceal their acts.

I acknowledge that the children so abused sometimes suffered further hurt when they were not believed because the offender was a priest.

I acknowledge that, when matters were reported, church authorities sometimes failed to act, or to act effectively, to support abused children and their families or to ensure that other children were protected from abuse by these offenders in the future.

I acknowledge that victims of McAlinden and Fletcher, and their families, sometimes suffered also from the attitudes and actions of some in the Catholic community towards them when they told their stories.

I acknowledge that the abuse perpetrated by McAlinden and Fletcher, exacerbated on occasion by the failures of church leaders, caused real and enduring harm to those children who were abused, to their families, and to many others who have been affected by this sorry history in their community.

I am totally committed to the care and nurturing of children in safety and love. I find the wilful harming of children for personal sexual gratification abhorrent. I feel outraged and disgusted at the sexual assault of children by men who betrayed their positions of trust, their sacred calling and the basic tenets of our Christian faith.

And so, as Bishop, I apologise unreservedly on behalf of the Diocese to those who suffered abuse, to their families and friends, and to all who have been subsequently harmed by the unfolding of these matters. My apology is intended to express the deep sorrow of the Catholic community that such things ever happened to people in our church; our desire that the victims now have the chance to tell their stories with confidence of acceptance and are able to obtain justice to the extent that this is possible; our commitment to assisting those who were abused as best we can; and our commitment to doing all in our power to protect children from such abuse now and into the future.

I am not currently in a position to comment as to the specifics of the facts relating to McAlinden or Fletcher, nor the management of their matters by leaders of the



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Diocese of Maitland¹ or other persons in the wider Catholic Church or Police. I was not in the Diocese at the times these events occurred and until I became Bishop I had no personal knowledge of these matters. These issues are rightly for the Special Commissioner to address and investigate and I, for my part, approach these investigations with an open mind.

To both the Police involved in Strikeforce Lantle and Counsel Assisting the Special Commissioner, I have and will continue to direct all Diocesan personnel to provide all possible hospitality and logistical support to facilitate access to any relevant records held by the Diocese and to endeavour to make the Diocese and all its constituent services as transparent as possible to ensure that all relevant material comes to light.

I welcome public inquiries such as this Special Commission of Inquiry and the forthcoming national Royal Commission. It is my hope that, beyond establishing the facts of what has happened in the past and contributing to improved child protection regimes now and into the future, such inquiries will contribute substantially to raising community awareness of the damage done by child sexual abuse. I hope that this increased social understanding of the problem will in turn reduce the sense of isolation experienced by victims of abuse and the reluctance that still exists in the broader community to report abuse whenever or wherever it occurs.

I and the Diocesan leadership team are committed to the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children. Bishop Michael Malone was determined that past wrongs and errors were not repeated. I have continued to commit significant and ongoing resources to Zimmerman Services, which is a specialist child protection unit within the Diocese; reporting to statutory authorities, investigating allegations of abuse and providing innovative, personalised healing and support services to people affected by the history of child sexual abuse within the Diocese.

I thank the Special Commission of Inquiry for undertaking this vital task.

Most Reverend Bill Wright
BISHOP OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE

¹ *The Diocese of Maitland was founded by Papal decree on 27 May 1847. It was not until 14 June 1995 when the diocese was renamed the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.*

Please note: Bishop Bill Wright has on other occasions expressed his abhorrence of the crimes of other Church personnel, and his sorrow for all victims. This is a printed copy of Bishop Bill's acknowledgement submitted to the Special Commission of Inquiry and therefore relates only to matters involving Fr Denis McAlinden and Fr James Fletcher, as specified in the Terms of Reference (below).

The Inquiry will report on the following terms of reference:

1. the circumstances in which Detective Chief Inspector Peter Fox was asked to cease investigating relevant matters and whether it was appropriate to do so; and
2. whether, and the extent to which, officials of the Catholic Church facilitated, assisted, or co-operated with, Police investigations of relevant matters, including whether any investigation has been hindered or obstructed by, amongst other things, the failure to report alleged criminal offences, the discouraging of witnesses to come forward, the alerting of alleged offenders to possible police actions, or the destruction of evidence.

"Relevant matters" means any matter relating directly or indirectly to alleged child sexual abuse involving Father Denis McAlinden or Father James Fletcher, including the responses to such allegations by officials of the Catholic Church (and whether or not the matter involved, or is alleged to have involved, criminal conduct).

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