



# DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE

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## PASTORAL MESSAGE TO THE DIOCESAN COMMUNITY from Bishop Michael Malone

Friday 16<sup>th</sup> July 2003

My dear brothers and sisters,

You will have learnt from the media that Fr James Fletcher, a priest of this Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, was charged by Police on 14<sup>th</sup> May, 2003. He was charged with sexual assault involving a minor, following an accusation made to the Police in June 2002.

In accord with normal procedures Fr Fletcher has been withdrawn from active ministry. The charges against him will now be dealt with by the criminal justice system.

Fr Fletcher has denied the allegations. He maintains his innocence; we must acknowledge his right to contest the charges and keep an open mind on the matter.

As the bishop of the Diocese I have several concerns:

- I am concerned for the complainant and that person's personal struggle in coming forward;
- I am concerned about that person's family and friends;
- I am concerned for Fr Fletcher and his family;
- I am concerned for the people of the parishes where he has ministered, conscious of their shock and their unanswered questions;
- I am concerned for all the priests of the Diocese, aware of the effects this recent allegation will have on them;
- I am concerned for all of you who are part of the Diocesan community and who suffer from this unwanted trauma.

There have been accusations in the media that I was negligent in not removing Fr Fletcher from his parish when the allegation was first known in June 2002.

It is true that I knew of the accusation then, but at that stage it was made clear to me that it was an unsubstantiated accusation yet to be investigated by the police.

I sought advice from the NSW Professional Standards Office (*Towards Healing* process) and others. I also consulted the Director of Catholic Schools and the local School Principal at the time and informed them of the situation.

Based on the advice I received and an assessment of the potential risk as per NSW Child Protection Legislation, I decided to leave Fr Fletcher in place, aware also of his poor health and near fatal stroke a few years ago.

The media also reported that I was negligent in not reporting the case to the Ombudsman's Office within 30 days of the allegation. Since this was a police investigation from the beginning I assumed that procedures such as reporting the matter to the Ombudsman's Office would have been included in that investigation.

My dear people, like yourselves, I am deeply troubled by this recent incident. It highlights our vulnerability as Church and our justifiable expectation that our Church-leaders act with integrity and transparency.

The Catholic Church in Australia does have procedures in place to respond to allegations of sexual abuse against Church personnel. Persons needing information or assistance may contact the Church's *Towards Healing* process on Ph: 1300 369 977. Alternatively, they may wish to report these matters to the Police.

Parishes and schools in the Diocese may wish to discuss their response to this situation. Please let me know if you would like the services of a professional facilitator for this purpose.

My heart is heavy as I write these words. Let us be conscious of one another as we respond to these difficult issues. We need to draw strength from our faith in a loving, compassionate and forgiving God. Our need for prayer and conversion is great.

With blessings upon you in the risen Lord,

I remain

Yours in Jesus Christ

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael Malone". The signature is written in dark ink and is preceded by a small cross symbol.

Most Reverend Michael Malone  
*Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle*