

TRIAL BY MEDIA

Even for "The Herald" (Newcastle) described recently by one of our priests as "that grubby little rag", the concerted attack on the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle commencing late September 2007 has been quite extreme. I resent having to pay \$1.20 for the paper, but I do so to learn what 'the enemy' is saying!

Readers of "Aurora" will know that I am usually happy to cooperate with the media. I appear reasonably often on radio and television and have enjoyed the interaction with both presenters and audience.

I cannot say the same for "The Herald" however. So called "investigative journalism" seems to demand that some members of staff be rude and arrogant. I think some of them are even dishonest in that their reporting is blatantly selective, using quotations out of context and generally writing a piece to suit their own agenda. Objective reporting is a joke.

In my dealings with some of those "journalists", I now refuse a personal interview because I know my remarks will be used against me and, put simply, I will not get a fair go. When these particular journalists look for a comment now I insist on the questions being put into writing and my answers being sent back the same way. My attitude is such, today, that any interviews in future will be recorded in the presence of a member of my staff.

The recent concerted attack on the Diocese came only from "The Herald". Both radio and television chose not to be involved. I found that significant since it indicates to me that even other media could see the personal nature of "The Herald's" attack and chose not to be a part of it. I think that is a credit to their integrity.

I also found it interesting that "The Herald" began to write these stories only after the main characters had died. Monsignor Cotter, Bishop Leo Clarke and Denis McAlinden have died in recent times. Now that they cannot defend themselves they are being put on trial by "The Herald", judged guilty and condemned. Watch the paper when I am dead!

Another important consideration in all this is the role of the police. It is obvious that the police have given Herald journalists access to police records-of-interview and other intelligence known only to them. While they are doing that attention is diverted from their own inability to process these matters adequately.

It was not the fault of the Diocese that Monsignor Cotter failed to be charged for his alleged complicity in the Vince Ryan matter. Nor was it his age at the time of his interview with police. The truth is that Monsignor Cotter did not believe he had committed a crime and therefore had nothing to be charged with.

The inability of the police to prosecute Monsignor Cotter was somehow seen by "The Herald" as the fault of the Diocese. It is as if we were powerful enough to pervert the course of justice.

At no time did the police inform me of their continuing grievance against Monsignor Cotter. No one ever said that it would be inappropriate to give Monsignor a proper funeral. I had never heard of John Mooney or John Ure, both retired police officers, until I saw their names in a Herald article on 29th September, 2007. It's a pity they chose to speak to "The Herald" and never to me.

Then Detective Troy Grant was the only policeman with whom I had dealings. He spoke of his disappointment that Monsignor Cotter was not charged a few years ago, but he was not hysterical about it. At all times Troy Grant acted with professionalism and integrity. He was always a thorough gentleman and acted accordingly.

Our Diocese had had to come to terms with the reality of child abuse by some of our priests. It has been difficult for us to accept that reality. That is why the response to the reality has been, at times, patchy and inadequate. To say that may be seen to be making excuses for past mistakes in our response. I do not seek to make excuses, just to ask for a more balanced understanding.

It is never correct to protect a predator or to cover up a crime. We understand that much better now than we did 30 years ago. Our child protection agency will always ensure that both perpetrator and victim are more appropriately dealt with.

Since I became bishop almost 13 years ago I have spent a lot of time speaking with victims of child abuse. I would always encourage a person to report their complaint to the police. Sometimes they do, but not always, especially when the matter happened many years ago and the person does not wish to "go public" or to attract unwelcome publicity.

I think "The Herald" would want every incident to be made public and its place in the community as a "moral conscience" thereby assured!

When speaking with victims I have apologised on behalf of the Catholic Church on many occasions, not just a few days ago as "The Herald" maintained. Some of those apologies were even printed in the same paper a few years ago!

When people have phoned my office about a personal matter it has always been my practice to respond as quickly as possible. My staff are instructed to note these phone messages and pass them on to the appropriate person. This has been the office procedure for at least 30 years. To say that a woman rang 3 times unsuccessfully is not believable. I do not wish to add to her anxiety but frankly, that could not have happened.

The Diocese neither condones nor covers up incidents of criminal behaviour by its personnel. To suggest otherwise creates confusion and anger within the entire community. We are committed to maintaining the protection of children and vulnerable adults within our parishes, our schools and all agencies.

"The Herald" has been quite irresponsible in its reporting of these matters. It is within its rights to report faithfully and objectively – it is not within its rights to distort, to manipulate, to play on the susceptibilities of vulnerable victims and to be judge and jury to deceased prelates.

We must always remember that a newspaper exists to sell copy. I buy it, but reluctantly!