

SPECIAL ISSUES SUB-COMMITTEE

Conference received the Sub-Committee's report, which was presented by Bishop Connors, Secretary.

36 SEXUAL OFFENCES

Conference considered and amended a public statement, *Sexual Offences and the Church*.

[APPENDIX IV]

MOTION

That the statement *Sexual Offences and the Church* be released, to be printed in full by the Catholic Press at the close of the Plenary Session of Conference.

CARRIED

MOTION:

That Conference authorise the Special Issues Committee to conduct a consultation with interested persons and groups through the Catholic Print Media in drafting a new Protocol which will be presented to Conference for approval at its next meeting.

CARRIED

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

SEXUAL OFFENCES AND THE CHURCH

The Catholic bishops of Australia assembled in their National Conference have devoted considerable attention to recent allegations of sexual offences on the part of some clergy, religious and Church workers.

Although they believe that some of the media coverage has lacked balance, the bishops acknowledge the tragic fact that there have been instances of such offences.

The bishops are aware that for some people the recent publicity has opened old wounds. Again the bishops pledge their support in working with others in the community to bring healing to those who have been hurt.

The harm that is caused by abuse and betrayal of trust can be serious and long lasting.

The overwhelming majority of clergy, religious and Church workers are faithful and dedicated to their ministry of service to others. They too are suffering because of the misconduct of a few. The whole church is suffering.

The Catholic Church will give first consideration to victims of sexual abuse and their families. The Church's welfare agencies, religious congregations and its pastoral care services will do all they can to assist people in the community who have suffered harm.

The bishops and leaders of religious congregations have been developing procedures for dealing with allegations of sexual offences against minors and adults.

The procedures aim to achieve four broad objectives:

- 1 To ensure a speedy, decisive and sensitive response to those who make a complaint.
- 2 To ensure that those who have been accused are dealt with justly.
- 3 To ensure that ongoing care is available to those who have been harmed.
- 4 To ensure that procedures are in place to minimise any risk to children. Some media reporting suggests that it is the policy of the Church not to make admissions and 'not to tell the truth'. This is a misrepresentation of both the letter and the spirit of the procedures which state that, in accordance with normal practice in every kind of allegation, admissions should not be made prior to a proper investigation of the relevant facts.

In the same way, the Church's insurance arrangements exist, not to hide a problem, and certainly not as a weapon to be used against those who have complaints. They are a prudent means of ensuring that if there is any legal liability, this will be met in an appropriate manner.

The present procedures will continue to be revised. It is expected that the next stage will involve a consultation with interested parties. The aim is to ensure that the Church's procedures are as effective as the complexities of this problem will allow.

It is through the commitment to truth, compassion and justice that the problem of sexual offences will be properly addressed. The bishops continue to make that commitment.

JULY 1993