



DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE

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26 April 1996

My dear Brothers,

The recent Australian Bishops meeting at Kensington (15th-24th April) spent many hours discussing the issue of sexual abuse in all its forms. We came to a number of decisions which will have widespread effect on the Church in this Country.

Please find attached a Pastoral Letter from the Bishops to the Catholic people of Australia. This letter clearly speaks of the problem and assures people of our intention to act decisively. I would appreciate your cooperation in making multiple copies available for your parishioners and drawing their attention to its availability.

In our own Diocese at present the issue is very real. People are asking us what is happening to our Church and our priesthood.

My personal opinion is that we are being humbled by what is happening to us and that perhaps we needed to be. If vulnerability is a pre-condition for encountering Jesus Christ, then we need to be vulnerable. Only then can real conversion take place. Each of us needs to examine our priestly lives and re-evaluate the quality of our commitment.

I want to assure you that I admire your courage at this time. Moreover, I join you in concern for one another and solidarity that our mutual ministry, while taking a hammering right now, will be strengthened through our faith in the risen Lord and love for the Good News.

God is with us at all times but especially in the darkness. Sometimes we are inclined to filter God's word according to what we already believe or experiencein the darkness, however, our "filters" are weakened and we listen more intently. I am convinced that we will emerge from the present crisis a little bruised, but with a clearer understanding of what God wants of us.

With the rest of the Bishops I want to express to you my admiration for your excellent ministry and the example you are to me and your people of commitment and dedication.

Let us pray for one another and the Church at this difficult time for all of us.

With fraternal love,

PS: Attached also: 1. a copy of my Media Release of 24th April regarding Vince Ryan's Court appearance.
 2. a copy of the Minutes of the Council of Priests' Meeting held 2nd April, 1996

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE CATHOLIC PEOPLE OF AUSTRALIA

Over the past ten days, the Australian Catholic Bishops have been meeting in plenary Assembly at Kensington, NSW. A major item on the scheduled agenda has been the issue of sexual abuse by priests and religious. The Bishops and Leaders of Religious Institutes share the dismay of many people at the instances of such abuse.

With deep regret, we acknowledge that a number of people associated with the Church have betrayed the trust placed in them by sexual abuse of minors and adults. In doing so, they have acted in a way that is contrary to everything the Church stands for.

We cannot change what has happened in the past, undo the wrongs that have been done, or banish the memories and the hurt. In seeking to do what is possible, our major goals must be: truth, humility, healing for the victims, assistance to other persons affected, an adequate response to those accused and to offenders, and prevention of any such offences in the future.

When the guilt of a priest or religious is established, the response of the Church authority must be appropriate to the seriousness of what has happened. Serious offenders who have abused their power may not be given such power again. Those who have made the best response to treatment recognise this themselves, and they no longer claim a right to return to ministry.

At our Conference we have sought to put in place a plan of action that would respond to the magnitude of this problem.

1. The Bishops and Leaders of Religious Institutes set up in 1988 a Professional Standards Committee composed of appropriately qualified professionals. The Committee will continue to review and update, in the light of the discussion that has taken place at the Conference, the principles and procedures according to which the Bishops operate.
2. The Professional Standards Committee will take advantage of the opportunity presented by the New South Wales Police Royal Commission to make a submission and will take account of any recommendations made by the Royal Commission.
3. Dioceses and Religious Institutes will be asked to engage professional and independent persons to make suitable case studies of how incidents of sexual abuse have been handled and how well or badly the needs of victims have been met and what might now be done to assist victims.
4. Likewise diocese and Religious Institutes will be asked to make a study of how an incident of sexual abuse has been handled in relation to the community in which it occurred, what lessons might be learned, what effects both the abuse and the Church body's response have had on the community, and what the Church body might now do to assist the community.

5. Meetings will be arranged through the counselling services of the Church in which Bishops and Religious Leaders might meet with persons who have suffered sexual abuse at the hands of a priest or religious and hear directly their stories, hurts, concerns and needs. The counselling services of the Church are to be empowered to arrange such meetings whenever they believe that this would be helpful to both victims and church leaders.
6. A widely representative Committee is to be established to prepare codes of conduct for priests and religious. It will consult widely, and seek the advice of victims of sexual abuse.
7. The Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission and Centacare Sydney will be asked to co-ordinate a study of any factors peculiar to the Catholic Church which might lead to sexual abuse by priests, religious or other church workers. The study will include a review of the relevant literature, interviews with experts and with other relevant Catholic bodies, and with those offenders who are willing to assist.
8. In collaboration with the leaders of Religious Institutes it is proposed to establish a program to treat those clergy and religious who suffer from psycho-sexual disorders. This program will contain a suitable spiritual input.
9. The Professional Standards Committee will employ a full-time Executive Officer to co-ordinate the above projects and to assist it in carrying out this mandate.

Those who have offended are a small minority, but their actions have affected all priests and religious, as well as the wider Church community. The Bishops say without hesitation that the overwhelming majority of priests and religious serve their people with integrity and dedication. They deserve affirmation and support.

We especially thank you, our Catholic people, for your understanding and prayers.

24 April, 1996



MEDIA RELEASE

24.4.96

***STATEMENT FROM BISHOP MICHAEL MALONE
CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF MAITLAND - NEWCASTLE***

On Tuesday, 23 April 1996 charges of sexual abuse were laid against Fr. Vincent Ryan.

In accordance with normal Church procedure, Father Ryan was immediately withdrawn from active ministry on 11 October 1995 and the proper procedure of our legal system is taking its course.

I would like to pay tribute to the sensitive manner in which the police have handled the matter.

In any situation of sexual abuse, a matter which is totally deplorable, we must all feel deep compassion for those who have suffered because of it, and the community will naturally feel anger, shock and grief.

Revelations of sexual abuse, particularly of the young, by clergy and other Catholics in a position of trust, have shaken us all. The hurt, dismay and damage that has been done calls for a practical and effective response both in charity and justice.

Our primary concern must be the victims who have suffered such indignities, many of whom, if not all, still carry the scars of sexual abuse.

Earlier when the problem in both Church and society was poorly understood, such abusive behaviour was treated as a moral problem. We know a great deal more now than we did, of the complex nature of sexual abuse, and the assistance that all survivors and the community need in the healing process.

The Diocese has put into place the following initiatives :

1. Professional, independent, confidential and free counselling through an organisation known as **Counselling and Support Services**. This service is available to anyone who has experienced any form of abuse from priests or others working as agents of the Church. The telephone number is 1800 620 900.
2. Special opportunities have been offered to groups of people within the Diocese to help identify issues of concern in the matter of sexual abuse.

I encourage any person to seek assistance from these services or myself in regard to these matters.

For further information or clarification please contact :

Fr. William Burston (Vicar General)

OR

Stephanie Thomas (Communications Officer)

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