

Media Release – 26.4.96**Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops 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 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 NSW Police Royal Commission to make a submission and they 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 the 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 advice of victims of sexual abuse.
7. The Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission and Centacare Sydney will be asked to coordinate 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 coordinate 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.