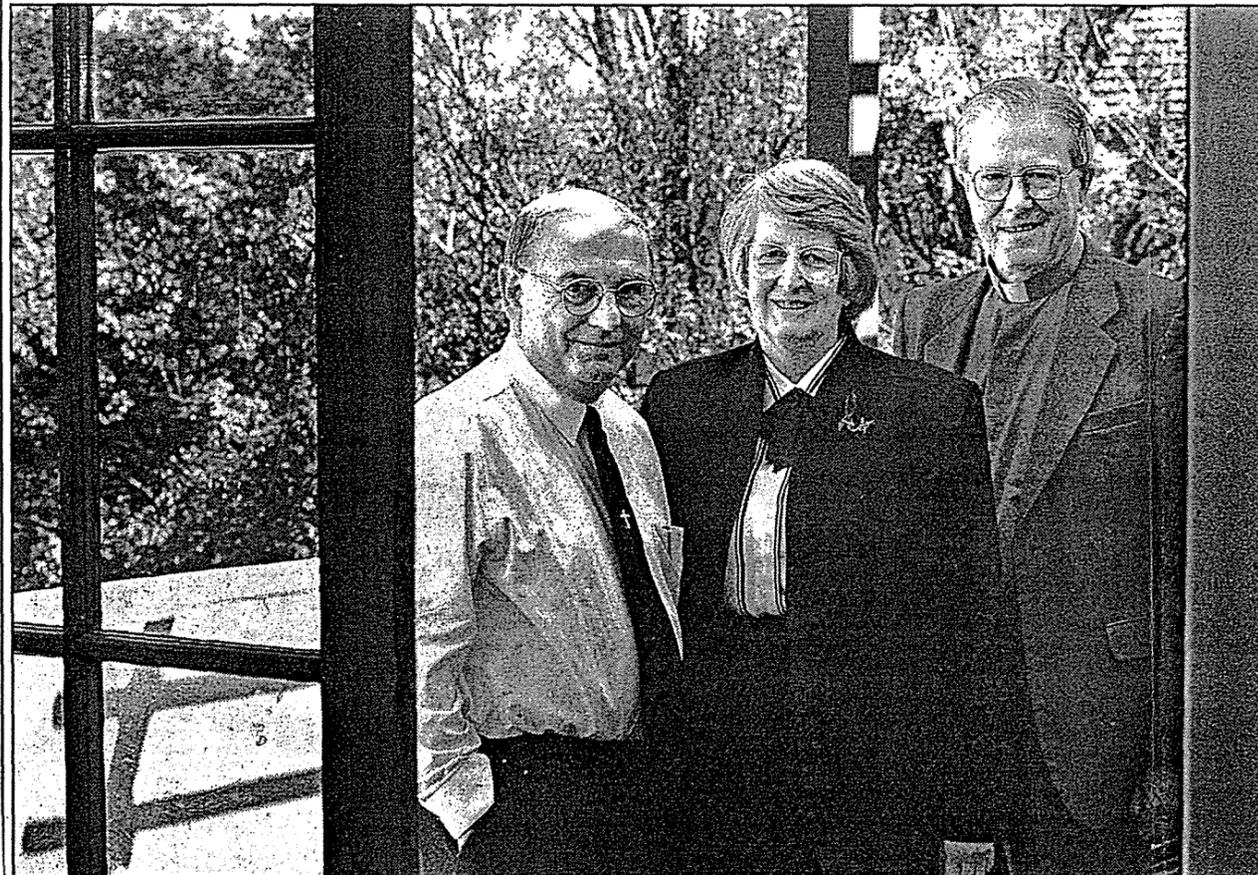


Church hid sex abuse: Catholic clergy



Father Usher, left, Sister Ryan and Bishop Robinson . . . shocked at the extent of abuse uncovered — Picture: MICHAEL AMENDOLIA

By KATHERINE GLASCOTT

SENIOR Catholic clergy "distressed" about sexual abuse in the church yesterday strongly criticised the hierarchy, including Pope John Paul II, saying "sinful and shameful" abuse of children and adult parishioners by some Australian clergy had been covered up.

Three members of the Australian Bishops Committee for Professional Standards, a national body set up to examine complaints of sexual abuse by priests and members of religious orders, accused church leaders of hiding behind Christian values.

Speaking at Sydney University during an international conference on sexual exploitation by health professionals and clergy, they emphasised difficulties they faced in forcing church leaders to "admit to the truth, to accept and face the fact that we have done wrong".

Assistant Bishop of the Sydney archdiocese, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson; a former leader of the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, Sister Angela Ryan, and the director of welfare agency Centacare in Sydney, Father John Usher, admitted they were shocked by the extent of sexual abuse by clergy that they had uncovered.

For Sister Ryan, "these recent

years have been very distressing as I have listened to experiences far beyond anything that I have ever expected".

Father Usher said it was important for the church to take responsibility for the betrayal of trust.

"These people discovered their trust was betrayed in the most devastating manner," he said.

"A relationship which most people believe to be sacred and caring was betrayed not because of human weakness, not because of misguided affection, but for purposes of intentional sexual gratification."

Bishop Robinson said he was very disappointed with the failure of the Pope to respond to the growing crisis, which threatened the future standing of the church.

In the past 12 months, several members of the Catholic clergy have been jailed for sexual offences in Australia.

Yesterday's attack also followed sensational revelations of paedophilia at the NSW police royal commission and claims by more than 200 former State wards of sexual abuse and neglect inflicted on them as NSW State wards.

Speaking in a packed conference room, Sister Ryan attributed the problem of sexual abuse to the effects of the vows of celibacy

that clergy are required to take when they enter the church.

"It (the vows) tried to crush us as people," she said.

"It took some time and adjustment to come to accept the realities facing me."

Bishop Robinson believed the church ignored the problems due to a fear of the consequences and of "just how much more abuse might be uncovered" in the communities.

"They are not very Christian views but they are there," Bishop Robinson said.

"It (the church) can't admit that it's wrong."

The three called on church leaders to talk to victims of sexual abuse to appreciate fully the physical, psychological and economic consequences they had suffered.

However, Sister Ryan warned that change would not happen overnight.

"Change will come when we as leaders are free of our own fears and defences and thus are able to listen to and work with the victims, with the perpetrators who are within our congregations," she said.

The bishops committee is compiling documents aimed at showing the church how to deal with abuse, but Bishop Robinson said the committee had encountered tensions in the church in its work.

