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*A Pastoral Statement
from the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference and
the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes.*

29 November, 1996

RESPONDING TO SEXUAL ABUSE - A PROGRESS REPORT

In April of this year, we the bishops and leaders of religious institutes of the Catholic Church in Australia, issued a pastoral letter in which we committed ourselves to nine strategies in responding to sexual abuse within the Church. In this present letter we wish to give a progress report on the implementation of these strategies.

1. The first commitment was to review and update the principles and procedures we would follow in responding to sexual abuse. A review of principles and procedures, entitled *Towards Healing*, is being published at the same time as this letter and will come into force on 31 March, 1997. It is a public document that will be available to all. We recognise that the document will become credible only to the extent that it is actually put into effect. Through this publication we are seeking the comments of all interested persons in the community so that the principles and procedures can continually be improved. One difficult problem is what to do when a victim tells a Church representative of a crime but insists that under no circumstance is the matter to be referred to the police. A letter is being sent to the Commissioner of Police in each State or Territory asking for discussions of this and other issues.
2. The second strategy involved taking advantage of the opportunity offered by the NSW Royal Commission. A report was sent to the Commission in September and the document *Towards Healing* will now also be forwarded.
- 3 - 4. The third and fourth strategies involved engaging professional persons to make case studies of how the Church has responded to sexual abuse in the past in relation to the victim (n.3) and the community in whose midst the abuse occurred (n.4). Although it is too early to assess the response to these strategies, the picture should become clearer by our next meeting in April 1997. Nevertheless, we are aware that an adequate response is not yet present and the matter must be kept under careful review.

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5. The fifth strategy concerned face to face meetings between Church leaders and victims so that the hurt and harm done might be more vividly experienced. An increasing number of those meetings is taking place, but there is still work to be done and it must be an on-going process.
6. The sixth strategy concerned a code of conduct for clergy and religious. This document is in its second draft. Early next year it will be circulated widely among victims, clergy and religious for comment. Since the important thing is that clergy and religious should truly make the principles their own, we are unwilling to impose a strict timetable. The process is more important than the words that finally appear on paper.
7. The seventh strategy concerned a study of factors specific to the Catholic Church that might lead to sexual abuse. The Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission and Centacare Sydney have completed a review of relevant literature and have prepared the necessary material for interviews by professionals of convicted offenders who are willing to cooperate. There will also be interviews with victims, with professionals who have treated offenders and with a number of other priests and religious. A progress report will be presented to our meeting in April 1997.
8. The eighth strategy concerned a program of treatment and preventive measure for offenders. An interim board of psychiatrists and psychologists has met on three occasions and is developing a treatment program that can begin accepting clients in early 1997. A program that can be implemented throughout the country is preferred to an institutional model. As well as assisting offenders, the program will be available to clergy and religious who feel that they could become offenders.
9. The last strategy concerned the appointment of an Executive Officer. Father David Cappo of Adelaide took up this position in June and has been of great assistance. He is a qualified social worker with many years experience in the areas of child protection and support for victims of abuse.

Much has happened and many individuals are responding better as a result. We have no desire, however, to make this report sound any better than it should. What has happened is only a small part of all that needs to be done. It will take much work by many people before the response of the Church is truly adequate to the reality of sexual abuse. We invited the whole Catholic community to assist us in every way possible.