

A PASTORAL STATEMENT ON CHILD PROTECTION AND CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE FROM THE AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

In recent years, society has become more aware of the tragedy of physical, sexual or emotional abuse of children.

These are crimes which are all the more reprehensible because of the abuse of the trust the child has placed in the offender.

Offenders against children are not limited to any occupation, social class, religion, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation or age group.

Many have been victims of abuse themselves.

Often they suffer from previously undetected personality disorders. Most are closely related to their victims or are family friends. It is very distressing for all church people to discover that a child has been abused by someone associated with a parish, school, child care centre or other Church agency.

Even one case is too many and cannot be excused or ignored.

In the past, lacking the knowledge provided by the modern behavioural sciences, Church authorities sometimes denied or minimised the seriousness of such incidents or accepted too readily the promise by an offender that such behaviour would not be repeated. Mistakes have been made.

They need to be acknowledged and are being acknowledged.

Becoming more aware of the problem and with experience gained in other parts of the world, the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference established a special committee in 1988.

The committee included people with relevant expertise in dealing with allegations of child sexual assault.

Since that time this committee has played an active role in educating bishops, congregational leaders and other Church authorities about the problem of child abuse.

As well, everything possible is being done to enhance and protect the welfare of children and to uphold the trust which children place in Church personnel.

The procedures which have been established and which are continually being reviewed, aim to ensure, as far as possible:

1. That all Church agencies have in place policies that aim to prevent children being at risk, including a policy that priests, religious and other Church workers will not be allowed to remain in a position involving risk to children if they are found to have offended;
2. That there will be care and support for any victims and their families;
3. That there is a speedy and decisive response to any allegations;
4. That the proper processes of the legal system will not be impeded in any way;

5. That those against whom allegations are made will be treated justly and compassionately; and
6. That an offender will be offered appropriate therapy and counselling.

The Pontifical Council for the Family sponsored an international summit in Bangkok September 9 - 11 1992 on the sexual exploitation of children.

We endorse the comments made in the Final Declaration:

"The sexual exploitation of children is a grave crime against the dignity of the human person.

"We commit ourselves to do all in our power to promote the God-given human values which recognise every child as a sacred gift to be nurtured, protected and loved.

Abuse of children will never be tolerated.

We shall continue to do all that is possible to protect those children who are given into the care of our schools, hospitals, child care centres or other youth facilities.

The Church will play its part in co-operation with the community in creating a wholesome and protective environment for children and their families and in finding solutions to this serious social problem.

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