

Dear Brothers,

Over the last week public media coverage of past events at Canberra has been graphic and relentless. The content of papers submitted to the court in relation to charges against Kostka has been appearing in daily newspapers and has been discussed on talk-back radio. Kostka stands charged with abuse, other Brothers or former Brothers have been named, and we are being collectively condemned for negligence.

In terms of legal procedures, Kostka has pleaded guilty and will be sentenced probably on March 13. Then a civil case will be taken up in relation to his crimes. This will involve not only Kostka but Marist College and the Trustees of the Marist Brothers.

In recent days, when I have been talking with Brothers about this situation, I have heard words like 'angry', 'let down', 'discouraged', 'want to ignore it but I can't', 'alarmed by the way the disclosures are spiralling'. Many feel that the line being taken by the media is irresponsible, unfair and even manipulated. The Brothers in Canberra and Rick Sidorko are under enormous pressure. Marist College students have been taunted by their peers.

In previous eras matters such as abuse and the judgements of Provincials and Councils as well as of school Principals were treated confidentially. While due respect for individual Brothers and authorities remains a guiding principle, concern for victims now over-rides such respect. The long-term personal damage victims suffer is real. Their families also suffer.

In this case, after charges were laid against Kostka, we made a public appeal for other victims to come forward. At the same time, a Canberra lawyer was active in searching out victims. Even though it is painful to us, we should be pleased that damaged people may now get some help and justice. We owe it to them. We may have preferred that they would choose the path of the "Towards Healing" program (which includes counseling and settlements) but most have chosen to join a civil action. It is quite possible that media attention will encourage others to come forward with new charges.

The civil case being brought in Canberra targets College and Province authorities regarding how abuse claims were dealt with at the time. This is a new charge for us to respond to. What was judged wise and appropriate in the 1970s and 1980s does not stand up to today's standards and protocols or to today's understanding of the impact of abuse on victims. Action taken in good faith by our leaders is now seen as inadequate. Our leaders of the past with their keen sense of care for kids would be the first to accept this and express regret. What we will never accept is that their alleged 'inaction' was motivated by indifference to victims or collusion with offenders. Care for kids to the point of sacrifice has been integral to our history and tradition.

The next weeks and months will be difficult times for us. We would have to be lifeless not to feel deeply embarrassed and ashamed in front of the victims of our own Brothers and in front of generations of supporters whose trust in us may be put into question, and not only in Canberra. Our ability to defend ourselves in the public media against

inaccuracies and generalized slurs is limited. Even if we wanted to speak up, there are limitations imposed on us while matters are before the courts.

So how do we respond in such circumstances? With humility and transparency, with a genuine desire for the healing of victims, with a heightened sense of solidarity with all who are working for the rights of children, with brotherly support and mutual encouragement. Individually and as communities, we are being asked to face front-on the question of faith, "Where is God present in this?". We are reminded of Jesus' own mindfulness and action that was the fruit of prayer and fasting. Now is a special time for this. Let's do it.

Far from being discouraged, we are spurred on to be part of God's answer to the social and religious challenges faced by today's children and youth - 'part of', not prime movers, not 'lone wolves', not messianic, not boastful. Our ministries have done and are doing great things. We are blessed in having a whole new band of Marists alongside us, people who share Marcellin's charism with us and live it in new ways. We are blessed in still having young men choose to live their whole lives as Brothers.

In all the battered emotions of this moment in our history as a Province, we give thanks for the gift of our vocation and for the grace to be part of God's mission in our time and place.

We are still taking advice from experienced people on the Province response to the coming civil action.

Please pray for the wisdom and strength of present leaders, especially Alex, Rick and myself, and for the extended Marist Family in Canberra.

Jeff

29 / 02 / 08