

MERCY ADMINISTRATION CENTRE

SISTERS OF MERCY

ROCKHAMPTON CONGREGATION

25th February 1997



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Dear Bishop Heenan,

I have chosen to respond to your request in writing in an attempt to express my thoughts more clearly. You initially asked me on 12th February if Fr Durham could continue living at Neerkol. After stating my reservations, I consulted the members of our Congregational Leadership Team, Deacon Jim Erskine from the Townsville diocese and finally the Sisters living at Neerkol. I met with you on 17th February to convey our decision that Fr Durham should not continue living at Neerkol and I tried to clearly state my reasons. These included:

Living on his own at Neerkol, would not offer Fr Durham any personal support nor any supervision which would seem very important for someone who has been accused of sexual abuse.

I believed it would be very painful for the Sisters and the parishioners, especially when they gather for mass, if Fr Durham was living next door and was unable to preside at or be present at the Eucharist.

As I also indicated, the house would have been available to Fr Durham until you found alternative accommodation and he could have returned as soon as the allegations were dismissed.

When you asked me to reconsider this decision, I referred to the principles and procedures outlined in "Towards Healing" but I did not find it very helpful in this particular case. I agree with the document that "a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty" (6.4.1). But I am uncertain from your conversation if you have actually asked Fr Durham "to stand aside from a particular office or from all offices held in the Church" (6.2) Can I assume that you believe he is innocent of the charges and that is why he has your permission to say Mass for the Sisters and to continue as their chaplain. If that is the case, it seems unusual that he is not allowed to preside at mass with the parish community.

I really cannot understand why Fr Durham would want to continue living in the very place where he has been accused of sexual offences. It does not seem at all appropriate. I agree with your observation that Neerkol is quite "private", but I believe there would have to be alternative accommodation which would be much less traumatic. Will you change the phone number of the presbytery so that he does not receive nuisance calls? How do you imagine that he will handle anyone, especially the media, who wish to harass him in person? Can you guarantee me that the Sisters who offer him hospitality will not suffer any persecution or that the reputation of the Conference Centre would not be affected?

For all these reasons, I do not believe that the presbytery at Neerkol is the best place for Fr Durham to reside while these allegations are being handled. Further, I recommend that the diocesan committee for Professional Standards should immediately develop a policy that will clarify some of these questions as Fr Durham might set an unusual precedent.

And yet, your original proposal seems to be the easiest solution for you and for Fr Durham and you have the responsibility of providing suitable accommodation for him. The presbytery at Neerkol is available for his use, if that is what you decide to do. I would need some clarification about his duties. I beg you again to consider other alternatives and ways to support him personally during this time. You should arrange some supervision and counselling for him in case the allegations are found to be true.

I pray that you make a wise decision as well as being just and compassionate.

C. Di-Anne Rowan

(Sr) Di-Anne Rowan
Congregational Leader