

BISHOP REFLECTS ON CONVERSATIONS ON SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Conversations on Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church were held throughout the Diocese of Rockhampton during August and September 2002. Gatherings were held in Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Mackay, Longreach and Emerald.

Facilitated by Ross Munro, Diocesan Director of Centacare, each meeting heard a presentation by Bishop Brian Heenan, on his understanding of the history of sexual abuse in the diocese. Discussion in small groups followed before the forum was open to experiences, stories, comments and questions.

The responses were given by a panel who travelled with the Bishop and Ross Munro, which included women and men with counselling skills who also have an understanding of sexual abuse, the *Toward Healing* process and reconciliation.

The meetings, in most cases, included testimonies from survivors and families who expressed the extent and seriousness of the abuse. The anguish of parents and family members on discovery of abuse to one of their own, was sometimes followed by guilt, anger and disillusionment with the Church. There were many people from parishes and the wider community seeking a greater understanding of sexual abuse, concerned about preventative practices and in general, supportive of the clergy and the Church, acknowledging the need to move forward.

The meetings were planned to last for an hour and a half, which some found to be inadequate. An important conclusion to each conversation was an invitation to fill out an evaluation form which asked:

1. What else would you have included in this conversation?
2. What would you have left out?
3. Is there anything else you would like to say to the Bishop on the topic?
4. Are there any other actions that the Bishop and the Church should be doing on this topic?

The high level of this response was a sign of people's deep concerns. The majority of

respondents spoke very favourably of the initiative to hold the conversations but stated clearly it was just a beginning. The responses are still being processed and recommendations will be forthcoming following the completion of a report of the Conversations.

Some of the consistent comments were:

- Victims must be encouraged to come forward, to tell their stories and they must be believed.
- Apologies must continue to be offered and appropriate support must be provided.
- The *Towards Healing* process should be better explained – the Helpline made more available.
- The secrecy that has surrounded abuse must be broken, a secrecy that was created by the perpetrators and a refusal to believe on the part of some Church leaders.
- The power and control wrongly exercised by Church people in leadership must be addressed.
- The Church through all of its members must be open and transparent in recognizing and dealing with sexual abuse.
- How does the Church report to civil authorities and should there be mandatory reporting of all cases of abuse?
- There was a constant call for education of children on the dangers around them through sexual abuse and that they must be encouraged to speak out when inappropriate behaviour is directed at them.
- Frequently questions were raised about how future priests are being screened and prepared for ordination in a way that they understand themselves, their sexuality and their commitment to morally upright behaviour.
- There was a concern for all people in the Church who had been hurt by abuse not directly but through disillusionment, a deep sense of shame and sometimes, loss of faith. How can they be assisted?
- There was a frequent mention of our priests and religious who are tarnished by the actions of a few within their ranks. How can they be offered

support? How do we show them we appreciate their fidelity and ministry?

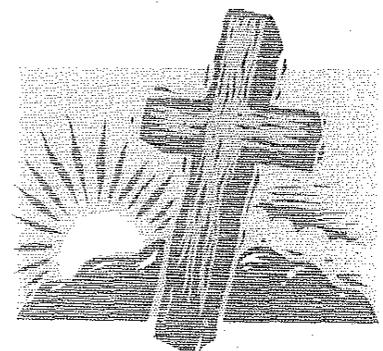
- While there was a demand that perpetrators be brought to justice, there was always concern for their support, their healing, sometimes with reminders of the good things they had done, and a request for prayer for them.
- There was a consistent call for prayer, for an entrusting of the long road ahead to God's mercy and God's power to bring healing and hope for the future.

It is not possible to summarise briefly all that has come from these meetings. Often it was said this is only a beginning but there was a genuine belief that victims and their families were at last being heard. So much is still to be done to begin to address a pain that will never be forgotten and may last a lifetime.

I thank the team who planned the overall process for the Conversations with Ross Munro and Centacare personnel as well as Father John Grace, Dr Gerard Goldman, Mr Gerard Delaney, the DCEO Media Officer, who travelled to each Conversation. I thank most especially all who attended the gatherings and the many who prayerfully supported our meetings.

I would like to emphasise again, the Helpline 1800 337 928 is available to report sexual abuse or seek support. To all who have been victims of this widespread evil in any of its forms, I offer again, my sincere apology and that of our diocesan family. With you all, I pray that God will walk with us as we move ahead with humility, truth and courage.

Brian Heenan—Bishop of Rockhampton



BISHOP'S MESSAGE TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND THEIR FAMILIES

I am grateful that you have come tonight to discuss together, the tragedy of sexual abuse within our Church and to find ways of healing, to lay the foundation for a better future. As I have said earlier, we have to face this issue of sexual abuse, "with honesty and humility. Only then can we hope to bring healing for the victims, and the hope of a safe and secure future for the generations to come".

I have been in this role of bishop for almost eleven years and during that time, the reality and revelation of sexual abuse has emerged gradually. In view of further recent evidence of abuse on the part of one of our priests, I have come to the conclusion that a forum like this was necessary. People have asked "why was it not done earlier" and I acknowledge that is a fair question. I can only respond that, like so many aspects of this tragedy, we have been slow to understand the reality of it all and to determine an appropriate response. I have become more conscious that the many people afflicted by this sad reality, need pastoral care or an opportunity to express their feelings, their anger, their confusion.

I first became aware of allegations of sexual and physical abuse in 1994. I am willing to acknowledge that I was slow to believe all that was being alleged. However, following the initiative of the Sisters of Mercy, we began to face the abuse issues around the Neerkol Orphanage, an area where there was much distress for some of the former residents. I also believe that the Sisters responded honestly to what had happened and I, with the Sisters, met with victims' groups and the Sisters and the diocese eventually continued to offer an honest and compassionate response. The effect on the wider community has become more and more evident.

In the meantime, reporting of sexual abuse on the part of priests, religious and lay workers was being reported widely throughout Australia. The Australian Bishops Conference, of which I am a member, and the Leaders of Religious Congregations throughout Australia, combined to provide a response to this tragedy, the extent of which was being revealed.

In 1996, they produced a document to try to deal with the issues, a protocol called "Towards Healing" which contains principles or values, that are at stake in the evil of sexual abuse and then practices or procedures that should be followed when sexual abuse is reported. This protocol was reviewed and redrafted in 2000. In every state, a group called "Professional Standards Resource Group" was set up. In our diocese, I have had a group called "Towards Healing", chaired by Father John Grace, consisting of people with professional gifts who have advised me on all related issues.

I have made it a practice over recent years to try to meet with victims and their families and to hear their experience of abuse with an open heart, coming more to understand the devastation that abuse has caused in their lives. It has been a learning experience for me and I do not pretend to appreciate what personal suffering is involved, both at the time of being abused, and for many, the ongoing, sometimes life long pain. We have offered the opportunity for counseling or other appropriate follow up support.

It is to be noted that my understanding and that of all church leaders has developed over a period of years, especially since the revelation of abuse has emerged so fully. Like most bishops, I had little knowledge of this criminal behaviour on the part of the perpetrator, that it was a deep seated weakness that was almost impossible to cure. Research is not agreed on the nature of this urge to violate children. At the beginning, I was given advice to be very careful of making any contact with victims and their families, as there could be serious legal and financial consequences.

Thankfully, all of that changed when it was realized that victims of sexual abuse and their families, needed someone to listen to them, to believe what they were saying, to offer a sincere apology and to provide what support the bishop, or the diocese or Religious Congregations could provide. I am not saying that we have got it right now, but we have responded better than we did in the past. In the past, there was a less than perfect response and I can only say that, had we known then what we know now, things would have been different. I

refer to our lack of understanding of how serious an evil is sexual abuse, how deep seated and almost impossible to cure it is, and how the role of a religious leader's, like a priest's, gave those people power and prestige which enabled them to have their way with victims and their families to create secrecy and a protection that come from their so called lofty status.

This evening, I believe, is another step in the process of honesty and healing, for sadly, there are many more victims than those immediately affected by sexual abuse. There are, of course, the families, the friends and the wider community who are left with confusion, anger and a need for healing. So this forum tonight, as has been said by our facilitator Ross, is an opportunity for the wider community to gather, the parishioners who share the sense of shame, those who feel betrayed and seek to be heard, and an opportunity for me to hear your thoughts and your suggestions. I want you to know that you must be free to say whatever you wish for it is clear that the silence of the past has not helped the healing.

So, I thank you for your coming and invite you to reflect and have your say. I hope this will help in the process of healing and enable us to move on as best we can. The community, in general, and the Church in particular, is not overcome by the evil doing of a few.

It has been greatly harmed, but we must move forward, seeking forgiveness and healing and know that the goodness of the vast majority of people, including priests and ministers, is the foundation on which we will build a better society.

I would like to conclude by acknowledging again the huge injury that has been done to innocent lives through sexual abuse in our society, and in particular, through some priests, religious and church workers. I offer to victims, my apology and that of the Diocese of Rockhampton. I also offer to all who have been affected throughout our communities my sincere apology and ask that we seek God's strength to create a safe and wholesome environment for future generations.

Brian Heenan—Bishop of Rockhampton