

Media Release

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ROCKHAMPTON BISHOP APOLOGISES TO FORMER NEERKOL RESIDENTS

The Children's Commissioner Norman Alford said today he was greatly honoured to be asked to relay to the media the formal apology tendered to the former residents of the Neerkol Orphanage at Rockhampton by the Bishop of Rockhampton.

The apology was officially accepted by the support group of former residents who have alleged they were physically and sexually abused whilst at the Sisters of Mercy St Joseph's Orphanage at Neerkol near Rockhampton during the 1940s to the 1960s.

In a letter to be published by parish churches throughout the Diocese of Rockhampton, Bishop Brian Heenan apologised to those former residents "who suffered spiritual, psychological, sexual and physical abuse at Neerkol".

The statement said that in September 1996, Bishop Heenan described the allegations of abuse as "scurrilous" and some statements about the conduct and conditions of the orphanage as "slandorous".

"After hearing of your experiences, I am now much more aware of your suffering, and I regret that I did not acknowledge that sufferings when you first raised them and that my first reaction was one of disbelief," Bishop Heenan said.

The Children's Commission is set to release a report on allegations of physical and sexual abuse at St Joseph's Orphanage at Neerkol in the next few weeks.

The apology from Bishop Heenan followed one issued by the Rockhampton Sisters of Mercy in October in which they apologised "unreservedly" to former residents "who were victims of physical psychological emotional and spiritual abuse".

Commissioner Alford said it is a great tribute to the supreme humanity of the Catholic Church and the former Neerkol residents that they had been able to confront the reality of their vastly different experiences and memories in a spirit of shared compassion and goodwill.

"They have powerfully reminded us all of how much can be achieved when people take time to listen, and importantly, to hear each other."

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