

## **AN OVERVIEW OF SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE DIOCESE**

**AUGUST 2002**

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 bring the 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 acknowledged 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, back 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 and in most dioceses, 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 essential gifts who have advised me on all related issues. I thank them.

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 and evil is sexual abuse, how deep seated and almost impossible to cure it is, and how the role of a religious leader, like a priest, gave that person 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.