

20 / 21 July 2002

My dear people of the Rockhampton Diocese

I wish to speak to you all about the dreadful matter of sexual abuse which has been revealed in our Diocese over recent times. It is an issue that must be faced with honesty and humility. Only then can we bring the healing and the hope of a safe and secure future for the generations to come.

Attention has been focussed by the media on the Catholic Church including the Diocese of Rockhampton. Bishops have been challenged to reflect anew on how they have responded to the scourge of sexual and physical assault by church personnel on innocent victims, especially children and young people.

I can only attempt to appreciate the degree of pain, suffering, and trauma that is experienced by those who have been subjected to such violation. The nearest and dearest of these victims are also confused and angered by the breach of trust from those whom they had formerly respected and admired. The communities where these incidents have occurred are also scandalized and hurt by the revelation of these regrettable incidents. They are oftentimes bewildered, wondering how they can remain active in their faith practice.

Over the last ten years, I have come to learn more about the ongoing effects of the abuse of children, adolescents and adults placed in their pastoral care by a number of clergy and religious. With Bishops and Leaders of Religious Institutes of the Catholic Church, I acknowledge with deep sadness and regret that such abuse has happened and I offer a sincere apology to the victims and their families.

When the victim has desired it, I have been willing to meet with her or him personally to listen to their feelings and offer my genuine concern. Assistance has always been made available for costs associated with counselling or other appropriate therapy

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes have been addressing the issue of sexual abuse with clergy, religious, teachers and lay leaders, since early in the 1990's. In 1996, a document called "**Towards Healing**" was produced. This outlined the nature of the problem, then gave directions as to how the issue was to be addressed. This protocol document sets out the principles and procedures to be followed when allegations are made.

(please hold up the document for all to see)

Following the release of this document, a response team "**The Queensland Professional Standards Resource Group**" was set up in each State to receive complaints on a telephone Helpline on **1800 337 928**. Leaflets explaining the working of the group and their response to calls, have been available in all of our Churches, schools and institutions.

(Please hold up leaflet)

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In attempting to make a suitable response, I have endeavoured to remain faithful to the principles and the procedures set out in the document "Towards Healing" first published in December 1996. This document "**Towards Healing**" was revised recently and is available for all to see

I believe we must do all we can to address the horror of sexual abuse and relieve the suffering of all who are affected by it. I have also become aware of the hurt, embarrassment and ridicule to which many Catholics have been subjected in recent years.

I would like to make available an opportunity for you to come together to gain fuller understanding of the problem, and consider the most suitable responses on our journey towards healing and reconciliation. There will be a time of sharing for participants who wish to do so.

Gatherings will be held in the regional centers of Rockhampton, Mackay, Bundaberg, Emerald and Longreach. These will be facilitated by a lay person and follow a format prepared by Centacare personnel and others whom I have asked to assist. Full details of these meetings will be made known with ample notice.

I wish to acknowledge and extend my gratitude for the many expressions of concern, support and appreciation that you and other people of good will have extended to the priests of the Diocese of Rockhampton in recent weeks. They strive to be faithful to the ideals of their calling and have a deep and genuine love for all whom they serve.

Finally, I trust that you, the people of the Diocese of Rockhampton, will support and work with me to do all that is humanly possible in reaching out to the victims and their families. Let us pray often for them that they will eventually experience the healing hand of God who can give them the peace which comes from God alone.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Heenan', with a cross symbol at the beginning.

Brian Heenan
Bishop of Rockhampton