

05 March 1999

Ms C E Holmes
Counsel Assisting
Commission of Inquiry of Abuse of Children
in Queensland Institutions
PO Box 554
Brisbane Qld 4003

Dear Ms Holmes

I thank you for the document you have forwarded, relating to the Inquiry into Neerkol. I find the document records a chronicle of abuse of many children which emanates from the years that Neerkol operated as an orphanage. Having heard most of the allegations before, I find your report draws them together in a logical and balanced way. It is a tragic story for which I, along with the Sisters, have apologised to all those who suffered abuse in any way.

While not wishing to diminish the reality and the sadness of what happened, I regret that the story of abuse could be taken as the only picture of Neerkol. As you are aware, over four thousand children passed through Neerkol. At the time allegations of abuse first began to surface, the Sisters of Mercy and I, as the Bishop of the Diocese of Rockhampton, received many testimonies from former residents who experienced none of the abuses, and spoke with gratitude of the Sisters of Mercy and St Joseph's Orphanage. My point is that, the almost one hundred years of the orphanages existence, was not a continuous story of abuse, though there were persons and periods where real abuse occurred.

Reading the last section "The Role of the Diocese of Rockhampton". I am unable to comment on behalf of my predecessors, the bishops, all of whom have died with the exception of Archbishop Rush, now of Brisbane. I have read in the Diocesan magazine called "The Review" that Bishop Andrew Tynan was a most supportive friend of the children. I enclose a photo copy of an article from the August 1951 edition which bears testimony to his support.

Regarding the placement of priests at Neerkol as chaplains, it was assumed that priests were honourable in their care of all people, especially children. We have become painfully aware of the reality that some priests, as well as some parents and carers of children in general, were in some cases responsible for abuse. The problem, or illness, was not understood then as it is today and you are correct in inferring that the incidence of child abuse among priests was seen as isolated, or at the worst, a passing aberration.

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Through our awareness of the problem and our recourse to the policy outlined in the "Towards Healing" document, we will be committed to eradicate both the reality of and the danger to children, by the misdemeanors of church personnel, including priests.

Once again, I thank you for your interim document and for your efforts to prevent the abuse of children in the future.

Yours sincerely

Brian Heenan
Bishop of Rockhampton