

Allegations of heavy discipline at Neerkol

I have read in the Sunday Mail, the Courier Mail (Thurs 30 Jan 1997 - Dave Owen), in the Morning Bulletin (19 Nov 1996, C. Perry) and in the Townsville Bulletin (21 Feb 1997) accounts from past residents at Neerkol.

One example, The Sunday Mail Oct 13 1996 - Darrell Giles

Mary Eather of Nerang alleges that children were “flogged and horsewhipped for wetting the bed, made to wear nappies to school regardless of age, made to wear wet bedsheets over head at breakfast table.” “Her head shoved in the toilet and flushed if nuns were not satisfied with cleaning”, “caning on bare buttocks and legs if school work was wrong”

Margaret Campbell of Twonville alleges that “some men at the centre used children in their care for sex. Others were abused when they were sent to cattle stations to work... she was sexually abused while working away from the orphanage... Some of the women at the centre delighted in using children for sadistic games... A woman detailed to bath the younger children was one of the worst offenders. This woman used to push their heads under the water and then pull them up, and they were gasping for air. And one day, one of them died... A nun would make two kids fight until one couldn't stand any longer. Orphans were beaten for the most minor infractions or made to do onerous chores... Children were poorly nourished and denied even basic luxuries such as chocolate.”

I was told by one man who once lived at Neerkol, that a priest (who is now dead) publicly flogged one of the boys who ran away from Neerkol, in order to discourage him and others. I have no corroboration for that story but I have no reason to doubt the person who told me.

I was told by one of the Sisters that ~~someone~~ ^{a boy} when ~~he~~ ^{he} was at Neerkol, ^{he} intervened when a Sister was hitting a child. He tried to restrain her and he was then whipped by the men who worked on the property for laying hands on one of the Sisters.

In several stories told by past residents of Neerkol, some Sisters have been described as cruel and hard. Mary Eather describes them as “barbaric, cruel and sadistic”.

What is my response?

I am distressed as I read the stories. I find it hard to believe that they happened. I am not saying that I do not believe the people who have told them. I find it ^{deliberately} ~~deliberately~~ ^{cruelly} hard to accept ~~fundamental~~. I do not like to see any child being physically punished. Even seeing children smacked by their parents is difficult today. I think it shows how far we have progressed if we do not have to resort to violence to solve problems.

I understand that in those days, strict discipline was seen as a necessity. It made children conform, obey the rules designed to protect them.

Parents were strict with their children.

Teachers were very demanding with their children.

In 1966, I was in Year 5 at a State School. The principal of the school inspected coopy books. Anyone who got less than 7 out 10, had to stand on the form while he walked along behind you and he hit the back of your legs with a ruler and encouraged you to do much better next time.

I believe that the Sisters who worked at Neerkol had many difficulties to face - large classes, distressed children, long working hours and very little money. Some were very heroic in their actions, some failed.

Is there a line in the recent film "Michael" that "he is an angel, not a saint". The same could be applied to our sisters, "They were not angels, they were not saints, they were painfully human".

But that is not enough. We must take action in response to these allegations. It has taken the highest priority in our my work.

We have formed a Professional Standards Committee to advise us on policy and procedures to respond to allegations.

We are cooperating in every way possible with the police.

We have encouraged one man who came to us with allegations of sexual abuse to go to the police. We passed on the information to the police as well.

We have met with Mr Norman Alford, the children's commissioner.

We are investigating some allegations. We are taking them seriously. Because the allegations concern events which took place 30 or 40 years ago, it has been difficult to investigate them. We do not know who to contact, where they now lived and so on...

As Bernice ~~said~~ told the Courier Mail, complaints will not be ignored by the Church.

"We will look carefully ^{and} ~~at any~~ honestly at any allegations which are brought to our attention."

Many of the people who worked at Neerkol are now dead, so we have found it quite a challenge.

Some allegations concerned sexual abuse and we felt it was important to ^{consider} investigate those first.

Some allegations of sexual abuse are being investigated by the police and we did not want to hinder their investigation nor contaminate the witnesses.

We are trying to find out as much information as we can. Unfortunately, I only began this job on Dec 14, so I have limited knowledge of the allegations. I never worked at Neerkol when it was an orphanage.

We are trying to support our sisters and to encourage them to talk about their experiences at Neerkol.

We have held seminars to educate our sisters and our co-workers about the reality of abuse.

We have attended meetings with the bishops and other church leaders to implement the Church's National Protocol, "Towards Healing" so that our response is based on principles such as truth, humility, healing for victims, assistance to other persons affected, an effective response to those who are accused and those who are guilty of abuse, and prevention of abuse. (Towards Healing, p 3 para 10)

We are compassionate people, we really feel for those who have been hurt. We want to offer support to victims of abuse, to listen to their experiences and to help them find healing for their hurts.

I am very sorry that children were hurt at Neerkol, that some children who had suffered in their own homes and with their own families, continued to suffer at Neerkol. No one wanted that to happen. I am sorry that our response at that time, did not eliminate suffering. That is ^{the} our reality. I am sorry that we were so naïve that we did not realise how some people would take advantage of the children and abuse the Sisters' trust. Unfortunately, I cannot change what happened in the past.

I encourage all the residents of Neerkol to tell their experiences. If any behaviour was criminal, then it should be a matter for the courts. We want to assure the residents of Neerkol, that they will be treated justly. We hope that the legal system will provide them with that. If they need any support, we will try to provide it.

Meanwhile, we ~~pray~~ are praying in earnest for the wisdom to respond as Jesus would do so that any victims can find healing for their hurts, and so that we might be better people.