

Bishop Michael Responds

As Bishop of the diocese I would like to apologise profoundly to all victims and their families for the immense pain and suffering caused by Vincent Ryan's criminal actions.

Vincent Ryan's conviction and sentencing have raised many questions in the minds of people both within the church and the broader community. How could a priest behave this way? Was there a cover-up? How is the diocese helping his victims? Is he still a priest? Will our parish ever be the same again?

Because of these criminal actions he will not be given back the power he has abused. As a serious offender he will not be able to return to ministry as a priest.

As Bishop I carry a heavy responsibility for the consequences of Vincent Ryan's actions.

Sexual abuse has a devastating effect on our society. Sexual misconduct by Catholic Church personnel

is contrary to Christian principles and is therefore intolerable.

Twenty years ago when Vincent Ryan's actions were reported to the then diocesan authorities, he was removed from his pastoral duties and treatment was recommended. None of us were aware of the triggers deep within which were to lead to his dysfunctional and criminal behaviour.

We now know a great deal more than we did then of the complex nature of sexual abuse. At that time sexual abuse in both church and society was poorly understood and such behaviour was treated as an emotional or moral problem. Our limited knowledge did not equip us to act in ways that addressed the reality of the issue.

It was not until 1995 that a tragic scenario of sexual abuse emerged when some of Vincent Ryan's victims had gone to the police. A subsequent investigation led to a conviction in May 1996. Vincent Ryan later confessed to a substantial number of other crimes and was sentenced for these in September 1997.

Since learning of the extent of Vincent Ryan's criminal activity, the diocese:

- issued a Pastoral Letter on the matter;
- offered free and independent counselling for victims of sexual abuse by church personnel;
- a public invitation to meet with victims;

- offered support for clergy and parishes;
- responded to news media.

The document *Towards Healing*, which sets out the principles and procedures for responding to complaints of sexual abuse against personnel of the Catholic Church in Australia, acknowledges that our first priority must be to victims of sexual abuse, balanced by a fair and just response to all parties (15).

Just as healing must take place for victims, it must also take place for the entire diocesan community. Healing, however, is not to be equated with vengeance. The church is a church of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation - a place for sinners and those sinned against.

Therefore, I urge that this process take place within the context of the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. He did not send the sinner away. Nor must we.

We have much to learn from what is happening to the church at present. Our need for genuine prayer, fasting and conversion is great.

Please spare a thought for us, your priests, who are deeply affected by these events. We are naturally hurt, confused and alarmed at the effect such events may have on the priesthood and the way some people may regard us. We try to serve you as best we can, but we too are fallible and fragile. Pray for us.

Bishop Michael Malone