



St. Patrick's Cathedral

Melbourne Vic 3002

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**Embargoed until 10.30am, Wednesday, 30 October 1996**

### **CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MELBOURNE APOLOGISES TO SEXUAL ABUSE VICTIMS AND APPOINTS AN INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONER TO ENQUIRE INTO ALLEGATIONS**

The Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr George Pell, today announced a strategy to offer justice, compensation, counselling and professional support services to victims of sexual abuse by Catholic priests, religious and lay people under the control of the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

On behalf of the Catholic Church, Archbishop Pell made a sincere, unreserved and public apology to both the victims and the people of the Archdiocese for the actions of those Catholic clergy and others "who have betrayed the trust placed in them by virtue of the privileged position they occupy in society".

Key initiatives in the Church's strategy are:

- \* the appointment of an Independent Commissioner, Mr Peter O'Callaghan QC, to enquire into allegations of sexual abuse by priests, religious and lay people under the control of the Archbishop of Melbourne.

The Commissioner's office will be the first point of contact for people wishing to make allegations or complaints, to seek counselling services or to obtain information about compensation.

- \* the establishment of CARELINK, a free counselling and professional support service for victims, under the direction of Professor Richard Ball, former Director of the Department of Psychiatry at St Vincent's Hospital.

The service will be provided to victims free of charge.

- 2 -

- \* the formation of a Compensation Panel, under the chairmanship of Mr Alex Chernov QC, to provide ex gratia compensation to victims of sexual abuse by priests, religious and lay people who are, or were, under the control of the Archbishop of Melbourne.

The Panel will include a psychiatrist, Dr Ruth Vine, Mrs Geraldine Croagh, who is a mother of four, and Mr. Tim McFarlane, a solicitor.

- \* an upgrade of the existing Pastoral Response Team service to provide victims with spiritual support and counselling at a parish level.

This will continue the excellent service provided by the previous pastoral response team under the direction of the Archdiocese's former Vicar-General, Monsignor Cudmore, and the Response Team Co-ordinator, Ms Helen Last.

- \* a service to provide counselling and support for priests and others accused of sexual assault.

Archbishop Pell said that the strategy addressed the sexual assault issue in a professional, caring and appropriate manner and should have a significant impact, both in a preventative and a healing sense.

Referring to a Pastoral Letter issued by the Catholic Bishops of Australia earlier this year, the Archbishop re-asserted that "we cannot change what has happened in the past, undo the wrongs that have been done, or banish the memories and the hurt. In seeking to do what is possible, our major goals must be: truth, humility, healing for the victims, assistance to other persons affected, an adequate response to those accused and to offenders and prevention of any such offences in the future".

The Archbishop stressed that it should be remembered that the allegations of sexual abuse concerned only a small percentage of the priests, religious and lay people serving the community on behalf of the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

- 3 -

The Church already has procedures in place aimed at preventing any recurrence of sexual abuse and to guard against the re-employment of offending clergy. For aspiring priests, the Church applies a rigid screening process and an explicit Code of Conduct which is impressed upon all seminarians.

The establishment of a Compensation Panel and the offer to pay ex gratia compensation was not an admission of liability, said Archbishop Pell. The Archbishop, the Archdiocese and the Church do not accept that they have any legal obligation to make payments to people making complaints.

Rather, the Panel will provide an alternative to legal proceedings against the Archbishop or Archdiocese and a forum for a fair, just and speedy settlement of claims.

To be eligible for an ex gratia payment, anyone making a complaint will need to establish the factual basis of the claim and the Panel will examine every claim exhaustively, in consultation with the Independent Commissioner, where appropriate.

Compensation payments, up to a maximum of \$50,000 per person, will be recommended at the discretion of the Panel. Such payments will be made in full settlement of all legal claims against the Archbishop and the Archdiocese. CARELINK services, however, will remain available free of charge and subject to professional monitoring.

If the recommended payment is not accepted, any person making a complaint will remain free to pursue the matter through the courts.

Compensation will not be paid for complaints relating to alleged offenders who were not priests of the Archdiocese, since they are outside the Archbishop's control.

Nor will it be paid in relation to complaints about religious or lay people unless they are, or were, working within the Archdiocese and are, or were, employed by, or subject to the control of, the Archbishop.

.../4

- 4 -

Archbishop Pell said that Mr Peter O'Callaghan QC, as the newly appointed Independent Commissioner, would operate totally independently of the Catholic Church, in much the same way as a Royal Commissioner does when appointed by Government.

The Commissioner will be empowered by the Archbishop to require the attendance before him of priests and religious the subject of complaints, and the Commissioner may conduct hearings at which there may be present the complainant, the accused and relevant witnesses.

The Commissioner will interview the complainants, the accused and relevant witnesses, and provide the Archbishop with both interim and final recommendations for appropriate action.

The police and the Government have been informed of the appointment of the Commissioner and the terms and conditions of his appointment.

Archbishop Pell said that the new free CARELINK counselling and support service would be staffed by a broad range of professionals with appropriate qualifications and experience. They will provide direct support services to victims and, in some instances, will refer patients to external counselling and support providers.

CARELINK will observe the usual patient confidentiality and legal reporting requirements but, with the consent of the patient, may also disclose information to the Independent Commissioner.

"Because of the complex and emotional nature of this problem, we can't pretend to have all of the answers yet, " said Archbishop Pell.

"But this is a genuine attempt to lessen the sufferings of the victims and their families. I'm hopeful that, with further improvements over time, these initiatives will go a long way towards addressing this horrific issue, which has so shocked our community".

**For further information, please contact:**

**Elisa Tranter or Nerissa Murphy, Catholic Communications**

**Telephone: 9417 7800**

**Peter Mahon, Royce Communications Telephone: 9820 3733**

**Fax: 9820 3143**