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8 June 1996

Archbishop F Brambilla
Apostolic Nunciature
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Your Excellency,

Thank you for your letter concerning a newspaper report of my presence at an international conference on sexual abuse and alleged criticisms by myself of the Pope.

A brief newspaper report of an hour long presentation will rarely do justice to all that happened, especially if the journalist has her own bias on the matter. There were about eighty people in the room and half of them were victims of sexual abuse by priests or religious. The whole session was being filmed by the ABC. Before I entered the room I knew that I had to bring with me three virtues - humility, total honesty and compassion.

The other two speakers and I spoke for about twenty minutes and then answered questions for some forty minutes. In our twenty minutes of presentation there was no mention of the Pope, but one of the questions directed at myself asked whether I was satisfied with the level of support and assistance we were receiving from "Rome". Both the question and my answer spoke in terms of "Rome" and there was no mention of the Pope. It was the journalist who, in order to make the statement more sensational, changed "Rome" to "the Pope". I realise that "Rome" includes the Pope but it also includes many other people.

I replied by saying that I was not satisfied with the level of support and assistance we were receiving from "Rome" on this issue. I said that I felt there was a growing crisis that threatened to engulf the Church and I looked for a more positive leadership from "Rome". I am happy to defend these statements, both by general comments and by reference to a particular case.

Among the many things that victims of sexual abuse look for, there are two that are always present. The first is that they want an apology, an admission that a wrong was done to them, that the abuse was not their fault, that they are victims. They want this apology both from the offender and from the Church which gave power to the offender and frequently reacted poorly when the offence was made known. Over the past months I have made this apology countless times, both publicly and privately. I have, however, constantly encountered the difficulty that an apology from a mere auxiliary bishop is not good enough. Both the victims and the media have been

asking me why the apology is not coming from higher up, why Cardinal Clancy is not speaking out, why "Rome" is so silent. I have many times felt very lonely and very exposed and, yes, I would appreciate much more help from "Rome". That is the only humble, honest and compassionate reply I can give to a group of some forty victims of sexual abuse.

The second thing that all victims look for is a strong guarantee that further offences will not occur. They want this guarantee in relation to the particular person who offended against them and they also want a guarantee that the whole Church will do everything possible and necessary to face this evil in its midst. Once again, an auxiliary bishop is in a poor position to guarantee that the whole Church throughout the world will look honestly and thoroughly at all its attitudes, structures, requirements for ordination, methods of formation etc. and ruthlessly change anything that might in any way contribute to this problem of sexual abuse. It is only "Rome" that can give these guarantees for the whole Church and it has not done so.

I am left wondering why "Rome" has not given more leadership in this matter. I fear that the reason is that many people there are still largely denying the problem. A year ago I asked you, Your Excellency, how this problem was being handled in Italy and you denied that it existed there at all. I hope that you have since learned that your answer was incorrect.

Turning now to the particular case, I was well aware that in the audience I was speaking to there was a woman who for nearly twelve months had been the victim of the sexual abuse of Bishop George Riashi. He admitted the abuse to Bishop Peter Connors and to yourself at the end of 1993. He also admitted it to the victim in the presence of Bishop Connors. You reported the matter to "Rome" and he was withdrawn from Australia in November 1994. In the month before that, during the last Synod, Cardinal Clancy and Bishop Connors personally informed the Cardinal Prefect of the Oriental Congregation of all aspects of the matter.

From overseas Bishop Riashi continued to insist that he was still Eparch of Australia and would be returning. In June 1995 this was confirmed in a public letter from the Melkite Patriarch. In August 1995, however, Bishop Riashi was instead promoted to be Archbishop of Tripoli in Lebanon. In this capacity he then returned to Sydney in August-September and made many public statements about his innocence and about bad people who sought to discredit him. He succeeded in turning many people against his own victim, so that they blamed her rather than him. Most of the Melkite community in Sydney is still in heavy denial.

To this day, Your Excellency, you have still not even acknowledged receipt of her original letter to you of 21st July 1994. Neither you, nor anyone in "Rome" nor anyone in the Melkite hierarchy has ever enquired after her welfare, given her any financial assistance to enable her to receive counselling, asked her opinion about any promotion, given her any explanation of the promotion, or even informed her of it. Even at this very late stage all of these things should be done. It is a classic example of a situation where apologies from people like Bishop Connors and myself are quite inadequate. She feels that she has been abused all over again. She feels that the

entire Church, from the Pope himself downwards, is telling her that the abuse did not happen or was of no importance, that she herself and her suffering are of no importance. I was shocked by the deterioration I saw in her physical condition when I saw her at the international conference.

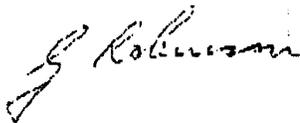
In April of this year you wrote to each bishop of Australia to inform them of the name of the successor to Bishop Riashi. You concluded by saying, "He takes the place of Bishop George Riashi who has been transferred to the archiepiscopal See of Tripoli." You concealed the truth from the Australian bishops and most of them are still unaware that a member of their own Bishops' Conference has been guilty of sexual abuse. And yet any one of them could at any time be confronted by the media with this fact and the promotion of the guilty person. Their ignorance would make them appear at best ridiculous, at worst sinister and deceitful.

When I was first appointed to the Professional Standards Committee I determined, as part of my commitment to honesty, that I would never seek to defend the indefensible. I find the promotion of Bishop Riashi indefensible and I will never defend it. Here we must surely make a strong distinction between the Pope and "Rome", for I cannot believe that the Pope himself knew all the facts and still approved the appointment, so I must conclude that other people who go to make up "Rome" kept the truth from him.

I was aware that people in that audience knew the facts of the matter. Had I said that "Rome" had been most supportive and given us every assistance, those people would have crucified both me and the whole Church with the facts I have related above. In the matter of Bishop Riashi "Rome" has been of no assistance whatsoever to the Church in Australia. It has, instead, created the potential for a massive scandal in this country. If a humble, honest and compassionate response is not given to the victim from the higher levels of the Church, that scandal will burst and there is no way that Bishop Connors or myself can prevent it from bursting.

I find it extraordinary that I stand to be condemned while Bishop Riashi has been promoted. Does this mean that by giving the only honest answer I could to the question asked of me I have in Roman eyes committed a far greater crime than he has?

Yours sincerely,



Rev Geoffrey Robinson
Assistant Bishop of Sydney