

ACBC PLENARY MEETING 13 - 22 JULY 1993
--

DRAFT MEDIA RELEASE - 15 July 1993

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT AND THE CHURCH

In recent months there has been extensive media coverage of allegations of sexual misconduct by clergy and church workers.

Much of this coverage was sensationalised and exaggerated.

Nevertheless the publicity highlights the tragic truth that among clergy, as among other professions and the community generally, there are instances of such misconduct.

The harm that is caused by abuse and betrayal of trust can be serious and long lasting.

The Catholic Church, through its diocesan structures, religious orders and community welfare services, will continue to offer such assistance as is possible to people in the community who have suffered harm.

For the past five years the bishops and congregational leaders have been developing a protocol for dealing with allegations of sexual misconduct with minors.

That protocol which is constantly being refined in the light of further knowledge and experience aims to achieve three broad objectives:

1. To ensure a speedy, decisive and sensitive response to those who make a complaint with ongoing care for those who may have been harmed.
2. To ensure that those who have offended are dealt with justly.
3. To ensure that the procedures are in place to minimise any risk to children.

Regretably, careless media reporting in some places suggested that it was the policy of the Church not to make admissions and 'not to tell the truth'. This was an outrageous misrepresentation as it ignored the context in the protocol which clearly stated that when the complaint was first made admissions should not be made until there had been a proper investigation. To make admissions without making an investigation would be a denial of a basic principle of natural justice.

In the same way the Church's insurance arrangements exist not to hide a problem, and certainly not as a weapon to be used against those who have complaints. This is a prudent means of ensuring that if there is any legal liability this will be met without serious impact on other church resources.

The present draft protocol will continue to be revised. It is expected that the next stage will involve a wide consultation with interested parties. The aim is to ensure that the Church's procedures are as effective as the complexities of this problem will allow.

The Bishops are aware that for some people the recent publicity has opened old wounds. They admire the courage of those who have come forward and expressed concerns. Again the bishops pledge their support in working with others in the community to bring healing to those who have been hurt.

The overwhelming majority of clergy and church workers are faithful and dedicated to their ministry of service to others. They too are suffering because of the misconduct of a few. The whole church is suffering.

The problem of sexual misconduct will not be eradicated without a commitment to truth, compassion and justice. The bishops pledge this commitment.

Brian Lucas