

SEXUAL ABUSE BY PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS: A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

(28-10-95)

1. The bishops and the leaders of religious institutes of the Catholic Church in Australia acknowledge and deeply regret the fact that a number of priests and religious have sexually abused children, adolescents and adults in their pastoral care.¹ On behalf of the whole Church they offer to the victims of such abuse a sincere apology.
2. They recognise that the bringing to light of this abuse is for them a challenge to both personal and institutional change.
3. The purpose of this document is to name the principles on which to base the Church's response to complaints of sexual abuse by priests or religious. It will be accompanied by a separate document detailing the procedures to be followed in particular cases.

SEXUAL ABUSE

4. Priests and religious enjoy a special position of trust and authority towards those who are in any way in their pastoral care, e.g. members of a parish, employees, students or persons seeking advice. Any attempt by a priest or religious to sexualise a pastoral relationship through suggestive comments, unnecessary questions or physical contact involves a breach of trust, an abuse of authority and professional misconduct. Such an approach will cause confusion to the other person, and any consent given by that person will fall short of free and full consent. Even when it is the other person concerned who seeks to sexualise the relationship, the priest or religious must guard the boundary against sexual contact.
5. Any form of sexual behaviour with a minor, whether child or adolescent, is always sexual abuse, and is both unethical and criminal.
6. Unwelcome sexual approaches to an adult constitute sexual harassment or, in more extreme cases, sexual assault, and may be subject to various provisions of the civil or criminal law. Even in cases where the civil authorities may not see grounds for taking action, Church authorities must be aware of the elements of abuse that are present and treat the matter accordingly.

1. There have also been cases of sexual abuse by other persons connected with the Catholic Church, both employees of Church agencies and volunteer workers, some clearly working in the name of the Church, others more marginally connected. It would be difficult to cover all of these categories in the one document, and there is obviously a special wrong when the offender is a priest or religious. Another document will be published at a later date dealing with abuse by other Church workers, and the present document will limit itself to priests and religious.

THE VICTIMS

7. The bishops and religious leaders promise to take seriously all allegations of sexual abuse by priests or religious. They will avoid the further suffering that can be caused to victims when the effects of abuse are minimized, distorted or denied.

8. Victims of sexual abuse can experience fear, shame, confusion and the violation of their person. They can feel guilty, blame themselves and take responsibility for what has happened. Children and adolescents can suffer distortions in the process of determining their sexual identity, and even their identity as persons. Victims can go through a long period of silence, denial and repression. Other people can refuse to believe them, reinforcing their sense of guilt and shame.

9. The intensity of the effects of sexual abuse on victims will vary. Some of the factors involved are the age and personality of the victim, the relationship with the offender, the duration and frequency of the abuse, the particular form of the abuse, the degree of force used, the threats used to compel secrecy, and the degree of violation of trust and abuse of power involved.

THE OFFENDERS

10. In many cases of sexual abuse free choices are made and many serious and sacred taboos are broken before the offence takes place. Vulnerable persons are often carefully selected as potential victims and care is taken to threaten them not to tell anyone what has happened. These facts argue to a clear awareness of the wrong that is being done.

11. Offenders can, indeed, frequently present as not merely respectable, but even as good and caring people. They can be quite exemplary in their public life, and this can actually become part of their allowing themselves a private life that is in direct contradiction to the public perception.

12. Bishops and religious leaders must, however, admit that there can also be institutional causes of abuse and institutional failure to prevent its occurrence. They must, for example, ask themselves why offenders, when first conscious of a temptation to abuse, were either ashamed or afraid to seek help, and why in these circumstances the Christian message failed to move them. If some offenders are working out of serious psychological problems in this field, such that sexual abuse quickly becomes a compulsion that leads to denial and self-deception, they must ask what institutional factors prevented the facing and overcoming of these problems.

THE CONTEXT

13. Until quite recently the extent of sexual abuse in our society was not known. This was in line with the secrecy that surrounded many aspects of sexual behaviour, and in particular anything that deviated from what was perceived as the norm. People in general also

did not understand the profound effects that sexual abuse can have on its victims.

14. Within the Church the problem was at first instinctively treated as a moral one, for the person guilty of sexual abuse had clearly committed a moral wrong. For many years, however, Church authorities did not adequately realise what it meant for a sexual offender to be truly repentant. They did not realise that an offender in this field is all too likely to offend again unless serious and lengthy therapy is obtained. They also paid too much attention to the fact that the sin was a sexual one and not enough to its effects on the victim, so that their understanding of repentance was misdirected.

15. The bishops and religious leaders of today recognise the hurt that has been caused by the lack of an adequate response when allegations were first made. Ignorance, fear and placing the reputation of the Church before the needs of victims contributed to their suffering. The bishops and religious leaders express profound regret and sorrow for this hurt and suffering.

16. Ignorance can no longer be an excuse. Sexual abuse is now discussed more often and more openly, and the effects of abuse on its victims are better understood. The response of the Church must, therefore, be a new response to a fresh understanding.

THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH

17. No one can change the past, undo the wrong that has been done, or banish the memories and the hurt. In seeking to do what is possible, however, there are six things in particular that the Church shall now strive for: truth, humility, healing for the victims, assistance to other persons affected, an appropriate response to the offenders, and prevention for the future.

TRUTH

18. Sexual abuse by priests or religious is news, and the news will not go away until the cases that have arisen have been resolved and no new ones occur. Any attempt to conceal the news story only increases its news value, and will quickly become itself the story.

19. However unpalatable the truth may be, the Church shall seek to know the full extent of the problem and the causes of such behaviour within a community that espouses the values of Jesus Christ.

HUMILITY

20. It is very humbling for a Christian church to have to admit that some of its priests and religious have committed the offence of sexual abuse. It is only humility, however, that will create the energy needed to care for victims and prevent abuse in the future. Pride must not take away that energy.

HEALING FOR THE VICTIMS

21. Whenever the offender has been a priest or religious, Church authorities accept that they have a responsibility to give whatever assistance they can to bring healing to those who have been victims of abuse.

22. Each Church authority shall designate competent and understanding persons to whom all complaints of sexual abuse by priests or religious may be made, and shall make available the names of these persons.

23. The persons designated shall listen fully, honestly and sympathetically to those laying complaints, both concerning the facts of the situation and the emotional and spiritual effects it has had on them. They shall assure complainants that, if the facts are truly as stated, abuse must be named for what it is and victims assisted to move the blame from themselves to the abuser. They shall enquire what needs to be done immediately to ensure that a complainant feels safe from further abuse.

24. When a report is then made to the appropriate Church authority, prompt action shall be taken to prevent the possibility of abuse to other persons. An offer of both psychological and spiritual assistance shall be made immediately, so that the healing process can continue.

25. In some cases the Church authority shall advise the complainant to take the matter immediately to the police, assist in doing so, and cooperate in police investigations. In other cases (e.g. when the facts are uncertain or when the complainant is unwilling to go to the police), the Church authority shall establish its own investigation to discover the true facts of the situation. In this case, the authority shall avoid delays in responding to letters or requests, and ensure that complainants are informed of the process being followed and of the progress of the case.

26. Whenever it is established that sexual abuse did in fact take place, the Church authority shall immediately enter into dialogue with victims concerning their needs, and ensure that the Church community truly does all that is in its power to assist the healing process. There will be occasions where it is appropriate for the authority to seek to secure a written apology from the offender to the victim, or to invite the offender to consider pleading guilty before the court and so spare victims further anguish.

ASSISTANCE TO OTHER PERSONS AFFECTED

27. The bishops and religious leaders shall seek to put in place some means of bringing both psychological and spiritual healing to all those persons who, in addition to the victims, have been seriously affected by acts of sexual abuse.

28. The effect on the family of the victim can be profound. Sometimes the disclosure is so terrible that the family would rather reject the victim than face the reality. Parents can feel guilty that they did not more effectively protect their child.

29. The parish, school or other community in which the abuse occurred will be deeply affected. The more popular and respected the priest or religious was, the greater will be the shock.

30. The family and close friends of the offender will be deeply hurt. They can find it difficult to know how to respond and how to act towards the offender.

31. All priests and religious are affected, and the thought that other people might be looking at them as potential child molesters is hard to live with. They have had to make changes in their manner of relating to all young people, and some good things have been lost in these changes.

32. The whole Church community has been affected, for all Catholic people have been dismayed by the stories they have heard. The credibility of the whole Church has been affected and the religious faith of many has been disturbed.

AN APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO THE OFFENDERS

33. Serious crime demands serious punishment, and serious offenders cannot ever be restored to the *status quo*. They were given power over and access to vulnerable people, they abused this power, and it cannot be given to them again. For many, this means that they must never again have the right to call themselves priests or religious or present themselves to others as such.

34. In addition to appropriate punishment, however, bishops and religious leaders accept that they have an ongoing role in seeking to ensure that offenders come to a true appreciation of the enduring harm they have caused, seek professional help in overcoming their problems, do whatever is in their power to make amends and, above all, never offend again.

35. In order to carry out this responsibility, Church authorities must continue to have some contact with offenders and some form of influence on their conduct. In order to achieve change, they must hold out to them something more than the prospect of unending condemnation. They must be able to tell them that there can eventually be forgiveness, by human beings as well as by God.

PREVENTION FOR THE FUTURE

36. The bishops and religious leaders shall undertake serious work aimed at reducing the risk of abuse by priests or religious in the future. This work can be presented under the headings of identifying the causes of abuse, the selection and training of candidates and community education.

IDENTIFYING THE CAUSES OF SEXUAL ABUSE

37. Five lines of enquiry immediately suggest themselves.

38. Many offenders were themselves victims of sexual abuse in childhood. What can be done to help them to seek assistance in the healing of this abuse before they run the risk of themselves becoming abusers?

39. Has there been a biased intake, that is, have persons prone to offend in this way been attracted to priesthood or religious life? Their motivation need not have been malicious, for they could have felt attracted to work with children or young people, but have been unaware at the time that this attraction contained unhealthy and dangerous elements.

40. Most acts of sexual abuse are more about power than they are about sex. In investigating the causes of sexual abuse, therefore, it is important to investigate the use and abuse of spiritual power by priests and religious.

41. Has there been a poor preparation for a celibate lifestyle? There is no statistical evidence to suggest that celibates are more likely than married people to commit sexual abuse, but a poor preparation for a celibate lifestyle can leave a person with a serious psychosexual immaturity.

42. Finally, has there been an absence of a forum in which priests and religious could comfortably explore psychosexual issues? Have anxieties consequently gone underground because priests and religious had to live up to expected images of perfection? Have these buried anxieties then sometimes been acted out in compulsive and disowned ways?

43. The investigation must look at all aspects and examine all possible theories, for in this field prevention is the only acceptable solution.

SELECTION AND TRAINING OF CANDIDATES

44. There is no simple means of separating in advance those who will later abuse sexually and those who will not. There are some signs to look for, e.g. victims of sexual abuse should always seek professional assistance in coming to terms with what has happened to them or they run a risk of themselves becoming abusers; those who tend to abuse power are more at risk than those who do not; psychosexual immaturity can direct sexual attraction towards other immature people, i.e. minors. It does not follow, however, that every victim of abuse, every strong leader and every immature person will become a sexual offender.

45. Despite this, the general remark can be made that the more mature and integrated a person is, the less likelihood there is of abusive behaviour. Consequently, the process of selection and training of candidates for priesthood and religious life must be seriously scrutinised and upgraded. The present shortage of priests and religious cannot be allowed to lead to a lowering of standards.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

46. The whole question of sexual abuse by priests and religious will be better handled if there is a better understanding of the issues by the whole Catholic community. Some of the areas in which this community understanding would be most useful are:

- accepting the fact of abuse and the consequences it has for victims, naming it for what it is and placing the blame on the offender, not the victim;
- looking for warning signs that abuse might be occurring and learning how best to intervene;
- never protecting an offender;
- learning what is entailed in the care of victims of sexual abuse, what to do and what not to do to assist in their healing;
- learning how to assist in the healing of whole communities and parishes;

COMMITMENT

47. The bishops and religious leaders of the Catholic Church in Australia commit themselves to the principles presented in this document. They invite the whole Church to assist them in offering whatever healing is possible to victims of abuse and in preventing any further abuse in the future.