



US calls in Australian archbishop



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Archbishop Philip Wilson, left, and the president of the US Bishops Conference, Bishop Wilton Gregory

By Joan Atkinson and Kathleen Carmody

The child sex abuse crisis has given the Catholic Church a great opportunity, Adelaide's Archbishop Philip Wilson has told 350 US bishops in Dallas, Texas.

"This is not a moment to lose our courage but a moment to respond," he told the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"This is a moment of crisis and one of the elements of a crisis is that it's always a moment of opportunity and if we are willing to admit the truth and prepared to do what's right, it's also an opportunity for renewal in the Church and for real growth."

Archbishop Wilson is the first Australian archbishop invited to address a US Bishops Conference.

He is an outspoken crusader for child protection reform in the Church, and earlier this year warned that the child sex abuse "firestorm" could destroy the Church if not brought under control.

Dubbed the 'healing bishop' because of his work on the issue of clergy sex abuse when bishop of Wollongong, Archbishop Wilson was invited to address the US bishops during their deliberations on imposing a policy of 'zero tolerance' in relation to child sex abuse by clergy and to hold private talks with his US colleagues.

It was expected he would share his experiences dealing with sex abuse in the Wollongong diocese.

Archbishop Wilson led the bishops in prayer and reflection and delivered the keynote address.

Up to 1000 media representatives attended the conference, the first official gathering of

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US bishops since the sex abuse crisis prompted an emergency meeting of US cardinals with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican.

The crisis in America has already seen four bishops and 250 priests lose their positions.

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Archbishop Wilson told the gathering the American media had done the Church a great service in pointing out the big problems concerning child sex abuse and the clergy in the US.

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“Always in life, we need courage to face up to the truth, and the truth is that at this particular time in the US, the press has done a great service to the Church,” he said. “It takes great courage on the part of the bishops to accept that truth and to respond to it.

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“There is no need to be pessimistic. It seems to me in every age in the Church there’s always a crisis. “Sometimes it comes from without, from external pressures in society, and sometimes it comes from within.

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“But in every generation, the people in the church and the bishops who are leaders have to have the courage to read what’s going on and make the proper decisions and that’s as true for now as it ever has been.”

A new beginning for Tampa refugees

Archbishop Wilson told the bishops they had to give priority to the care of victims and ensure justice was done as well as establishing proper procedures.

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“Bishops have to allow themselves to become engaged with the victims and feel their pain and suffering,” he said.

“Our Lord is asking us to take up the cross with these people and stand in solidarity with them.

“As well as real care for the victims, you also have to have proper procedures to make sure justice is done; but that’s not enough.

“You also have to lead in the formation of a proper culture that establishes and supports proper relationships, especially with children. You have to develop as far as possible a child-safe culture.”

After the address, Archbishop Wilson said Australia was in a different situation from the US: “In Australia, we made a lot of these decisions a long time ago in 1996 and a lot of the issues the American bishops are dealing with are ones we confronted at that time.

“That’s why in dealing with these cases we have to be really open and courageous in the decisions we have made.”

(In 1996, the then new Archbishop of Melbourne, Archbishop Pell, introduced protocols for dealing with allegations of sex abuse by clergy; Towards Healing was introduced a month later as the national protocol for dealing with such allegations.)

Archbishop Wilson said he read an article in an American newspaper that stated that no-one would want to be a Catholic bishop today.

“But I wanted to jump up when I read that and say, ‘I do ... I’m really happy to be a Catholic bishop today’ because, with all the struggles and difficulties we’ve got, it’s also a moment of great opportunity,” he said.

“We have to keep going back to what it is we are really asked to do and follow the Gospel message. If we are to find any renewal of the Church we will go back to basics and ask what God is really expecting of us.

“And if we find any corruption in the Church, then that corruption has to be faced up to and dealt with.”

Archbishop Wilson said trust would only be restored in the Church if church leaders were honest and true.