

Towards Healing sends a 'clear signal'

Joan Atkinson

In 1996, the Catholic Church released its groundbreaking national sexual abuse protocol, entitled *Towards Healing*, to address the issue of sexual abuse complaints against church workers.

The national principles and procedures document was endorsed by Australia's bishops and leaders of religious orders and later upgraded in December 2000.

The Australian Catholic Church sought to establish the grounds for the public to "judge the resolve of church leaders" to tackle abuse complaints.

The revised document for handling abuse complaints against the Catholic Church widened the net from sexual abuse to include complaints of physical and emotional abuse.

They set out the principles and procedures to be followed by the church when responding to complaints of abuse against Catholic Church personnel — including clergy and religious, pastoral workers, teachers and all those working for an official church agency in a paid or voluntary role.

On sexual abuse, they state that clergy and religious are in a special

position of trust and authority and any attempt to sexualise this relationship is "a breach of trust, an abuse of authority and professional misconduct".

It also states that "physical and emotional cruelty also constitute an abuse of power".

"Where a priest, religious or another person appointed to a position of pastoral care by an agency of the church has acted towards a child or young person in a way which causes serious physical pain or emotional or mental anguish without any legitimate disciplinary purpose as judged by the standards of the time, when the incidents occurred, then this constitutes abuse," the guidelines state.

"Victims of 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."

At the launch of the new guidelines, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, who is chairman of the Catholic Church's National Committee for Professional Standards, said they publicly established the grounds to enable the community to "judge the

resolve of church leaders to address issues of abuse within the church".

He said the church hoped the changes would further reduce the number of those dissatisfied with the church's efforts to heal those who had complained and would help the church to respond in a "just and compassionate manner to complaints of abuse".

The review of the church's guidelines, completed in 2000, was run independently by Professor Patrick Parkinson, Pro-Dean of Sydney University's Faculty of Law and author of the book *Sexual Abuse and the Churches*.

Vicar General Fr David Cappel, who was instrumental in preparing the *Towards Healing* document, says the revised procedures continue to be a "clear signal" to all in the church and in the broad community that sexual, physical and emotional abuse are the antithesis of priestly life "and indeed the ministry of priests, religious and lay people in any and all positions of leadership and service in the church".

Fr Cappel affirmed that a high level of transparency must always exist in the church's response to issues of abuse.