

'Healing bishop' to help US priests with abuse crisis

By COLIN JAMES

ADELAIDE Catholic Archbishop Philip Wilson has been asked to help US bishops cope with an unprecedented sex-abuse crisis.

He will leave today to address a special session at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in Dallas, Texas, which starts on Saturday.

It is the first time an Australian archbishop has been invited to the conference, which will be attended by 350 bishops from across the US.

It will be their first official gathering since the sex-abuse crisis erupted earlier this year, prompting an emergency meeting with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican last month.

Archbishop Wilson was asked three weeks ago to lead the US bishops in prayer, deliver a sermon at mass and spend three hours privately talking with them about the child-abuse scandals.

The US Catholic Church has been rocked by escalating



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allegations that have led to arrests of clergy and cases being seriously mishandled by diocesan bishops.

Archbishop Wilson said yesterday he was honoured to have been invited but also was "a bit over-awed" by the prospect of counselling the US bishops.

"I have been asked to lead them in reflection about what they are going through," he said. "I think they would probably want me to talk to them about the feelings I had when I was confronted with

similar issues in Wollongong. I will be talking to them about how, as bishops, they are coping with this challenge."

Archbishop Wilson, 51, became known as the "Healing Bishop" in Wollongong through his handling of a spate of child-abuse scandals involving Catholic clergy and teachers.

Archbishop Wilson said he would be telling the US bishops about how he confronted sex abuse in Wollongong and, more recently, in Adelaide.

He is a vocal opponent of the use of confidentiality clauses in compensation payments to victims, describing them as "hush money".

Archbishop Wilson also has engaged a private consultancy, Child Wise, to develop a child-protection strategy for all Catholic schools in SA.

Conference spokesman Mark Chopko said he had been asked to address the bishops because he was "wise in matters of faith, skilled in diocesan leadership and experienced in dealing with the scandal and the pain and misfortune that clerical crimes bring upon bishops, the people and the church".

"He has faced the same challenges in his own country and has done so with grace, dignity and confidence," Mr Chopko said.

More than 800 media representatives will attend the conference, where the bishops are expected to pray publicly for forgiveness.