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ORPHANAGE ALLEGATIONS 'SCURRILOUS'

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By MARTIN THOMAS religious affairs writer BISHOP of Rockhampton Brian Heenan has condemned as ""scurrilous" allegations of sexual and physical abuse made against the Sisters of Mercy and priests who staffed St Joseph's **Neerkol** orphanage.

In a pastoral letter Bishop Heenan criticised what he described as sensational media reports which threatened to destroy the good work of the sisters and the diocese of which the church could be ""justifiably proud".

""I am fully conscious that when individual allegations of abuse are made, they must be investigated, and both the sisters and the diocese will give every assistance to the appropriate authorities, for justice must be done," he said.

""Yet, I will not remain silent while the immeasurable benefit that has come to many children through the dedication of the sisters is destroyed by sensationally written media articles or TV programmes, which do not speak the truth."

The church's defence came as a former resident of **Neerkol** dismissed any allegations of sexual abuse.

Daphne Smith, who spent 13 years at the orphanage from the mid-1950s, said she was angered and annoyed by what she claimed were untrue claims of sexual abuse.

""In my years at **Neerkol** I never saw any sexual abuse," she said.

""Discipline at **Neerkol** was very, very strict but with 300 children under their care it had to be."

Ms Smith said there were ""one or two" staff at **Neerkol** who disciplined children very severely but she said claims of abuse were being blown out of proportion.

Police are investigating claims of sexual and physical abuse at **Neerkol**. Several of the allegations involve dead former staff members.

Rock

hampton Order of the Sisters of Mercy congregational leader Bern eice Loch called claims ""outlandish".

""There have been claims, all in The Courier-Mail, of a lime pit, a secret dungeon and that girls were being forced to fight each other on Saturdays," she said.

""I don't understand why these outrageous assertions can be believed without any effort to test their validity."

Sister Loch said the order would help police inquiries.

""We would be very anxious to make amends where any child in our care has genuinely suffered," she said.

Bishop Heenan said the church could be proud of **Neerkol**'s fine reputation despite what had been published.

""I deplore the insult that has been offered to the sisters, chaplains and the children who were cared for and educated at **Neerkol**," he said.

""To these good people may I offer a reassurance of our gratitude and the thanks of those who cannot respond at this time."

Bishop Heenan was critical of the media reporting the allegations.

""Scurrilous allegations have been made against the sisters and the priests in the form of claims of physical and sexual abuse," he said.

""Slandorous statements have been made about the conduct of the orphanage, the conditions that prevailed there, and in general about

the care that was given to the children."

Former resident Dave Owen, 58, is suing the State Government over alleged lack of care while he was a ward of the state at **Neerkol**.

Family Services Minister Kev Lingard has told Parliament that a hotline set up for allegations of sexual and physical child abuse had received a number of complaints against the **Neerkol** orphanage.

Neerkol closed in 1978 after 100 years of operation.