



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Statement from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Royal Commission Bishops' Response

November 12, 2012

The President and Permanent Committee of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, on behalf of the Australian Bishops, support the announcement by the Prime Minister of a Royal Commission into child sex abuse in our community. This is a serious issue not just for the Catholic Church but for the whole community. As Catholic bishops and as individuals we share the feelings of horror and outrage which all decent people feel when they read the reports of sexual abuse and allegations of cover ups.

Over the past 20 years, there have been major developments in the way the Church responds to victims, deals with perpetrators and puts in place preventive measures. In addition, there is a much greater general awareness of the issue of paedophilia in the broader community.

Sexual abuse of children is not confined to the Catholic Church. Tragically, it occurs in families, churches, community groups, schools and other organisations. We believe a Royal Commission will enable an examination of the issues associated with child abuse nationally, and identify measures for better preventing and responding to child abuse in our society.

We have taken decisive steps in the past 20 years to make child safety a priority and to help victims of abuse. This includes working closely with police.

While there were significant problems concerning some dioceses and some religious orders, talk of a systemic problem of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is ill-founded and inconsistent with the facts.

To assist in determining the appropriate scope of the Royal Commission, it would be very useful for police and child protection authorities to release the information they have about the number of cases they are dealing with now and the situations which they have arisen: families, government organisations and non-government organisations, including churches. In NSW it would also be helpful to highlight when the offences occurred and, in particular, whether they occurred pre or post the Wood Royal Commission in the 1990s, and the rigorous child protection regime put in place after it.

We deeply regret the suffering and trauma endured by children who have been in the Church's care, and the effect on their families. Mistakes were made and we apologise to victims and their families for these failures.

Much of the public discussion is about how the Church dealt with cases 20 or more years ago. Critics talk as though earlier failures are still prevalent. Major procedural changes in dealing with these matters have been implemented by the Church since then.

It is unjust and inappropriate to suggest crimes are being – or have been – committed, without producing evidence; without asking those accused for their responses before making generalised slurs.

It is unacceptable, because it is untrue, to claim that the Catholic Church does not have proper procedures, and to claim that Catholic authorities refuse to cooperate with the police.

As we have welcomed the opportunity to cooperate with the Inquiries announced in Victoria and NSW, and to address issues that have been raised – both justified and unjustified – we are also ready to cooperate with this Royal Commission. We look forward to consultations with the Government on the terms of reference.

For media enquiries, please contact Beth Doherty, Communications Director on 0407 081 256.