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8th May 2010

An apology from Bishop Michael Malone to the community

On August 7 2008, the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle held a Service in Solidarity with survivors of sexual abuse and their supporters. On that evening I gave a heartfelt apology. I meant those words then and I reiterate them today.

“This gathering tonight is a declaration that the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle intends to act in a more compassionate and caring way towards victims of sexual abuse.

As bishop of this diocese for over 13 years I admit to you that I have felt torn between loyalty to the church, loyalty to church personnel of whom I am one, and loyalty to the victims or survivors of sexual abuse.”

At that gathering I promised that my first concern would be for the victims of what I consider to be a repulsive crime. With Pope Benedict I unequivocally condemned the behaviour of those clergy who betrayed the trust placed in them by both the church and the people of God, especially children and young people. I apologised to the victims of abuse and their families, to the vast majority of honourable and dedicated clergy, religious and laity who serve the diocese, to the parishioners and the people of the Newcastle, Hunter and Manning for the great pain, the shame and the terrible damage experienced by so many. Over the years I have also met with and personally apologised to survivors on behalf of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

Since 2008, there has been a litany of revelations about the Catholic Church, including our own diocese. When people read, hear and see these stories, questions arise and uncertainty grows. How was it allowed to happen? Did the church put perpetrators before victims? Is the church still covering up? Has anything really changed?

As these questions are asked, our church and indeed our whole society, continue to struggle with the issues of child sexual assault. As more stories emerge I again want to articulate my regret for past hurts and failures. I also want to tell you about the dedication and commitment of so many that has moved our diocese forward and gives me hope for our future. But to do this I need to talk to you about an event in NSW that changed everything.

OUR PAST

In NSW there is a dividing line between what used to happen in the protection of children and what we do now. That dividing line is the Paedophile Inquiry, which was part of a Royal Commission headed by Justice James Woods. From December 1994 until July 1997 the Paedophile Inquiry looked at the history and practices of governments, community agencies and churches in NSW in terms of issues of child sexual abuse. This included the Catholic Church.

The findings of the Paedophile Inquiry were stark and damning with a general conclusion that "the entire system was flawed". The Inquiry found that churches were ignorant of matters of sexual abuse and the "strongly compulsive and recidivist [in] nature" of paedophile activity. Churches were confused over limits of confidentiality and the need to forgive and trust compared with the duty to protect and oversee. Churches were torn between loyalty to the church as an institution and loyalty to people. Churches were uncertain how to appropriately and effectively respond to allegations when people did not want to go to the police. The Paedophile Inquiry showed that churches, including our diocese, were neither better nor worse than other comparative organisations in NSW.

There is no doubt that our diocese was unprepared to deal with the complexity of child sexual assault and the acts of fundamental betrayal perpetrated by predatory individuals.

To our dedicated parishioners, to the vast majority of honourable and dedicated clergy, religious and laity who serve the diocese, I am sorry that you continue to share the burden and shame of our failure and our history.

OUR PRESENT

As a result of the Paedophile Inquiry there was a massive shake up of government services, legislative changes and a significant injection of funds to assist government authorities to address their identified shortcomings.

Fundamental change also occurred within the church. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference established the National Committee for Professional Standards, with Directorates in each state. Through the National Committee, the church developed Towards Healing, a comprehensive set of principles and procedures for dealing with abuse allegations. The Royal Commission "commends these developments" (Vol.5, 11.93). Towards Healing has been updated three times and the current iteration was released in January 2010. Towards Healing includes a chapter which deals with the reporting of criminal offences and child abuse, giving clear appropriate guidance.

The Paedophile Inquiry reported that the Catholic Church's "response to the matters disclosed by the Royal Commission is held up as a model for other Churches and religious organisations to follow." (Vol. 5,11.5).

In these intervening years our diocese has equally undergone a period of confronting and difficult change.

The Paedophile Inquiry and my initial experiences as Bishop were a wake up call. Over the intervening years the diocese has responded honestly, earnestly and with integrity in our parishes, our schools and our welfare services. We have tried to redress our historic shortcomings by having:

1. demonstrated exemplary cooperation with police investigations undertaken by general duties detectives or Strike Force Georgiana;
2. established pre-screening for employees working in child related fields with prohibited employment declarations, 'working with children' background checks and

- national criminal record checks (where appropriate under the legislation);
3. endeavoured to meet all our obligations as mandatory reporters to the Department of Community Services;
 4. developed independent and rigorous reporting and investigation processes for allegations of child abuse against diocesan personnel, which is overseen by the NSW Ombudsman;
 5. implemented the Towards Healing principles and procedures; and
 6. attempted to reach out to those who have suffered harm as a consequence of child sexual assault within the diocese.

I know that all that the diocese has done will not lessen the grief, pain and anger felt by some victims and their supporters. Auxiliary Bishop Geoffrey Robinson said, "Nothing's perfect in this field. The only solution is the impossible one, of turning back the clock and making the abuse un-happen. Short of that nothing's perfect."

To those victims of abuse and their families who continue to find no peace or comfort, I am sorry.

OUR FUTURE

Our diocese is part of the Catholic Church which is made up of human beings prone to human flaws. Systems need to be put in place to guard against our human failings in all realms of activity, particularly when we work with the vulnerable: children, the frail aged or people with disabilities. Our diocesan leaders have established such systems in our schools, social services programmes and parishes. The diocese will continue to promote the safety of children through a number of innovative strategies that have been established or are in the process of being developed.

Zimmerman House is a specialist diocesan unit that promotes strategies to prevent child abuse and provides specialist child protection advice, training and information sessions for diocesan personnel. It also investigates child protection allegations involving diocesan personnel, supports people lodging a complaint with Towards Healing, reports criminal offences to police and supports the healing of individual adults affected by child sexual assault.

Insights is an innovative diocesan programme exploring ways of addressing the destructive impact of abuse on the diocesan community and individual parishes. The intent of Insights is simple and yet profoundly powerful: "The courage to listen: to ourselves, to each other and to the Spirit, in response to the issue of sexual abuse in our community in the hope of addressing together our emerging needs." Over the last quarter of 2009 and into 2010, people from throughout the diocese gathered in small groups to reflect, listen to others and share their thoughts and feelings on the impact of sexual abuse. I remain saddened by reports that some Catholics are questioning their beliefs and some are turning away from the church. I understand that struggle and acknowledge that pain and pray that this programme and others will help them and our community.

The diocese and I continue to strive to enact the Towards Healing protocol, to act with truth and humility, to strive for healing for victims, assistance to others affected, a just

response to those who are accused, an effective response to those who are guilty of abuse and the prevention of abuse.

I have said to you that I was ill prepared, as was the whole diocese, for what I inherited in 1995. I acknowledge that we live in a broken world and that ours is a wounded church. As Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle, I am committed, with the diocese, to strive to mend what is broken, to bind what is wounded and to seek forgiveness for our failures.

Sincerely,

Bishop Michael Malone
Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle
8th May 2010