

DIocese OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE



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Pastoral Message to Diocesan Community from Bishop Michael Malone

Friday 16th May 2003

My dear brothers and sisters,

You will have learnt from the media that Fr James Fletcher, a priest of this Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, was charged by Police on 14th May, 2003. He was charged with sexual assault involving a minor, following an accusation made to the Police in June 2002.

In accord with normal procedures Fr Fletcher has been withdrawn from active ministry. The charges against him will now be dealt with by the criminal justice system.

Fr Fletcher has denied the allegations. He maintains his innocence; we must acknowledge his right to contest the charges and keep an open mind on the matter.

As the bishop of the Diocese I have several concerns:

- I am concerned for the complainant and that person's personal struggle in coming forward;
- I am concerned about that person's family and friends;
- I am concerned for Fr Fletcher and his family;
- I am concerned for the people of the parishes where he has ministered, conscious of their shock and their unanswered questions;
- I am concerned for all the priests of the Diocese, aware of the effects this recent allegation will have on them;
- I am concerned for all of you who are part of the Diocesan community and who suffer from this unwanted trauma.

There have been accusations in the media that I was negligent in not removing Fr Fletcher from his parish when the allegation was first known in June 2002.

It is true that I knew of the accusation then, but at that stage it was made clear to me that it was an unsubstantiated accusation yet to be investigated by the police.

I sought advice from the NSW Professional Standards Office (*Towards Healing* process) and others. I also consulted the Director of Catholic Schools and the local School Principal at the time and informed them of the situation.

Based on the advice I received and an assessment of the potential risk as per NSW Child Protection Legislation, I decided to leave Fr Fletcher in place, aware also of his poor health and near fatal stroke a few years ago.

The media also reported that I was negligent in not reporting the case to the Ombudsman's Office within 30 days of the allegation. Since this was a police investigation from the beginning I assumed that procedures such as reporting the matter to the Ombudsman's Office would have been included in that investigation.

My dear people, like yourselves, I am deeply troubled by this recent incident. It highlights our vulnerability as Church and our justifiable expectation that our Church-leaders act with integrity and transparency.

The Catholic Church in Australia does have procedures in place to respond to allegations of sexual abuse against Church personnel. Persons needing information or assistance may contact the Church's *Towards Healing* process on Ph: 1300 369 977. Alternatively, they may wish to report these matters to the Police.

Parishes and schools in the Diocese may wish to discuss their response to this situation. Please let me know if you would like the services of a professional facilitator for this purpose.

My heart is heavy as I write these words. Let us be conscious of one another as we respond to these difficult issues. We need to draw strength from our faith in a loving, compassionate and forgiving God. Our need for prayer and conversion is great.

With blessings upon you in the risen Lord,

I remain

Yours in Jesus Christ

Signed

Most Reverend Michael Malone
Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle



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MEDIA RELEASE

Statement from Bishop Michael Malone

For Immediate Release

Wednesday 14th May 2003

It has come to the attention of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle that Fr James Fletcher, a priest of this diocese, has been charged by Police today (14th May 2003) with sexual assault involving a minor.

In accord with normal procedures, Fr Fletcher has been withdrawn from active ministry.

I would like to convey my deep sense of concern to the complainant in this matter and to his family and friends as the case is dealt with by the criminal justice system and beyond.

Sexual abuse is a crime and cannot be tolerated.

The Catholic Church in 1996 established the process known as *Towards Healing* which sets out the principles that form the basis of the Church's response to complaints of abuse and the procedures to be followed in responding to individual complaints.

Persons needing information or assistance may contact the Church's *Towards Healing* process, Ph: 1300 369 977. Alternatively, they may wish to report these matters to the Police or myself.

Any parish or school communities who would like the opportunity to discuss their response to this specific situation are invited to contact the diocese, their parish priest or principal who will set in motion a process through professional facilitators.

*Most Reverend Michael Malone
Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle*

For media enquiries contact: Stephanie Thomas 0419 263 901 <ends>



**Catholic Commission
for Employment Relations**
leadership through service to strengthen work relationships

PRESS RELEASE 15 MAY 2003

NO INVESTIGATION BY OMBUDSMAN INTO CHURCH

Yesterday, Fr James Fletcher, a priest of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, was charged in the Maitland Local Court in relation to sexual assault matters.

Today, the Daily Telegraph carried a story on page 2 which asserted that the Church and Bishop Michael Malone are the subject of investigation by the NSW Ombudsman.

The Executive Director of the Catholic Commission for Employment Relations Mr Michael McDonald said this afternoon that, following discussions with the Ombudsman's Office today, he was advised that there is no investigation being carried out into this matter by the NSW Ombudsman.

Mr McDonald stated that the NSW Ombudsman was notified of the allegation against Fr Fletcher and that it is their normal scrutiny of this matter which has been carried out. This does not mean that there is an investigation as claimed by the Daily Telegraph.

Contact Mr Michael McDonald on (phone number)

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