

# A JOINT STATEMENT BY THE CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOPS OF MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY

In light of publicity this week about sexual abuse by Catholic priests, we wish to issue the following statement:

## Apology

We again acknowledge with deep sadness and regret the evil of sexual abuse and other betrayals of trust which have been committed by a small minority of Catholic clergy. The integrity of the overwhelming majority of priests and religious is beyond question.

We reaffirm the words first stated by the Catholic Bishops of Australia in a 1996 Pastoral Letter. "We cannot change what has happened in the past, undo the wrongs that have been done, or banish the memories and the hurt".

Our goal of moving "towards healing" is paramount.

At all times, we strive for complete openness and transparency in our dealings with victims of abuse.

We remain fully committed to the Church's policies and procedures that provide healing, on-going support and compensation for victims and the prevention of such offences in the future.

On behalf of the Catholic Church in Melbourne and Sydney, and personally, we apologise, sincerely and unreservedly, to all victims of abuse, and to the Australian community, for the wrongs and hurt suffered.

## Complaints

We urge anyone wishing to make allegations or complaints to do so. We remind anyone wishing to make allegations that may involve criminal conduct of their complete right to refer those allegations to the police at any time.

A range of initiatives are available in Melbourne and Sydney for victims.

In Melbourne, please call the Independent Commissioner Peter O'Callaghan QC on (03) 9225 7979. In Sydney, please call the Contact Line of the Professional Standards Office on 1300 36 99 77.

Making contact is the first step in:

- **being listened to with openness and compassion**
- **having your complaint investigated**
- **accessing free counselling and support (as required)**
- **seeking appropriate compensation**

## Compensation and Help

There has been some confusion this week about the nature of the Melbourne compensation system that has been in place since 1996. The compensation arrangements for Sydney are somewhat different.

In Melbourne, when the Independent Commissioner is satisfied that abuse has occurred he can refer the victim to the Compensation Panel. The Compensation Panel holds a hearing and can recommend ex-gratia compensation of up to \$55,000. This is a free process.

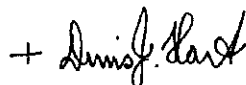
In Sydney, compensation is available under the national *Towards Healing* protocol. *Towards Healing* is administered through the Professional Standards Office.

Under both systems:

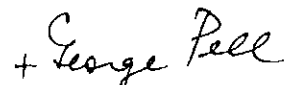
- 1 Compensation payments are not an attempt to buy silence.
- 2 They are offered in response to the needs of victims as an alternative to litigation, and in some cases where there are no grounds for litigation.
- 3 When a compensation offer is made, it can be accepted or rejected.
- 4 If it is accepted, the applicant will be required to sign a release, which brings any further legal proceedings to an end. However, if the offer is rejected the applicant's rights to commence or continue legal proceedings are not affected.
- 5 The discussions and documents produced in the compensation process are confidential. (This occurs all the time in out-of-court and mediated settlements).
- 6 Victims are not prevented from discussing the abuse they have suffered with anyone at any stage, but many prefer that their privacy be respected. Victims are not silenced as a condition for receiving counselling or compensation.

Regrettably, the Catholic Church has taken a long time to come to grips effectively with the sexual abuse issue. But there have been good protocols in Australia for the last six years. We will continue to work for further improvement.

Be assured that our goal is to assist people who have been abused to move "towards healing".

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Denis J Hart  
Archbishop of Melbourne

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George Pell  
Archbishop of Sydney