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July 23, 2013

The Honourable Georgie Crozier MLC  
Chair, Family and Community Development Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
Melbourne Vic 3000

**Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry  
into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations**

**Reply to statements by Mr Michael Crowe at hearing in Ballarat on 28 February, 2013**

As the Catholic Bishop of Ballarat, I wish to reply to some of the assertions made to the parliamentary committee on February 28 and published on the parliamentary inquiry website.

*As recorded on page 2 of the transcript, Mr Crowe stated that in 2011, when he was a teacher at a Catholic school, he was forced — blackmailed — into signing a separation agreement. He says that this was a direct result of witnessing the then parish priest interfering with a child in 2010. Mr Crowe's testimony suggests that he complained about the priest to Catholic education authorities but the authorities did nothing to address the complaint and in fact sought to silence him as a whistleblower (page 3).*

The diocese has no record of any complaint being made by Mr Crowe that he witnessed a priest abusing a child. I have spoken to the relevant authorities, including the director of the Catholic Education Office and my predecessor Bishop Connors who was the bishop at the time, all of whom have confirmed that they have no knowledge of any such report. Under the relevant child protection legislation, Mr Crowe would have been personally obliged as a teacher to report any instance of abuse of a child to the Victorian Department of Human Services. There is no evidence that I have seen of such a report having been made by Mr Crowe.

In regard to the allegation (pages 2 and 8) that Mr Crowe was “blackmailed” into signing a separation agreement, there is no indication from the files of the Catholic Education Office Ballarat that the separation agreement was signed under duress. Before signing the separation agreement, Mr Crowe had the benefit of advice from an industrial officer of the Victorian Independent Education Union who could have supported him if there was any concern about pressure to sign the agreement.

*Mr Crowe alleged that the Diocese of Ballarat continues to deny and cover up abuse by clergy.*

The diocesan protocol *Protecting Students: Maintaining Relationships* outlines a process for managing allegations of abuse of students by employees in Catholic education in the diocese and clearly states that any accusations against clergy and religious staff are to be addressed “under the *Towards Healing 2010* set of procedures”. These procedures include encouraging adult complainants to report historical abuse to the police. If an adult complainant does not wish to go to the police, *Towards Healing* provides for an investigation by an independent assessor.

When I appeared at the Parliamentary Inquiry on 29 April 2013, my written submission included an assurance that “From that time [when *Towards Healing* took effect in 1997], the diocese of Ballarat has followed the procedures outlined in *Towards Healing* in responding to complaints of child abuse” (page 4). I remain committed to these procedures and am not aware of any situation in which the diocese of Ballarat has not followed them.

*Mr Crowe claimed that there was a culture of preventing teachers from making reports of abuse.*

Teachers in Victoria who have formed a belief that a child has been or is in danger of being abused are mandated to report this to the Department of Human Services as per the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*.

All school and diocesan procedures and policies stress that it is each individual teacher who is mandated and that if they have formed a belief, they must not be dissuaded from making a report by their principal or governing authority.

A report can be made with or without the support of their principal or parish priest and the Department of Human Services can maintain the confidentiality of the teacher making the report, so it is not reasonable to suggest that a teacher would be too intimidated to make such a report.

Professional development in relation to mandatory reporting requirements has been a feature of the diocesan induction process for all new teachers since the passing of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*.

*Mr Crowe's statements suggest that an allegation against a priest would not be investigated and the priest would be left in his position of responsibility in a parish.*

As mentioned above, the policy of the diocese of Ballarat is to follow *Towards Healing 2010* procedures in all matters pertaining to alleged abuse of a child by a member of the clergy. These procedures include encouraging adult complainants to report historical abuse to the police. If an adult complainant does not wish to go to the police, *Towards Healing* provides for an investigation by an independent assessor.

Staff in Catholic schools have the option of reporting concerns for investigation by the Catholic Education Office Ballarat or by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority or by the Police. Nothing prevents staff from making reports to any of these groups.

In the course of the parliamentary inquiry, Mr Crowe made an allegation, which was publicised in the media, of child abuse against an easily identifiable priest. This allegation was made on February 28. The priest immediately stood aside from his parish duties to await the results of an expected police investigation. The priest denies the allegation. At this stage, July 23, the priest is still on leave from his parish as the Victorian police continue their investigation of this matter.

I request that this reply be published in conjunction with the transcript of Mr & Mrs Crowe's appearance on 28 February 2013.

Paul Bird



Bishop of Ballarat