

# Terms of

abuse

As the Catholic Church fends off criticism over child abuse, a new allegation has surfaced of its callous attitude towards victims, reports **Kelly Burke**.

**A**S THE highest order of the Australian Catholic Church's ecclesiastical bureaucracy gathered in Canberra to discuss once more the mounting problem of sex abuse and misconduct among its clergy, one of the executive officers within a bishops' national committee decided to call it quits.

It was 1994, and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference was struggling to create what by the end of 1996 was to become known as "Towards Healing" - a national protocol for dealing with complaints of sex abuse against church employees. As a backdrop to the meetings, the ongoing scandal of the church's handling of its most notorious convicted pedophile, Father Gerald Ridsdale, played on through the media.

It was one of those pressure-cooker meetings that prompted the executive officer to tender her resignation. The conference's process, she later said, and the bishops' approach to the worsening problem of sex abuse had become "too nauseating" to continue.

It was to take another five years before she could put her disgust in writing.

On March 4, 1999, she forwarded a letter marked as confidential to the church's trusted team of lawyers at Corrs Chambers Westgarth. The letter outlined her concern that the Towards Healing process was still not adequately addressing the predatory nature of pedophile and sex-offending priests. Moreover, she believed the following practices still existed under the reformed protocol:

1. The threat to shame and disgrace the victim, rather than the perpetrator.
2. Placing on the victim the burden of protecting the church from scandal.
3. Making women and children responsible for the moral behaviour of men and priests.
4. Intimidating, diminishing and demoralising victims so that they ended up believing in their own evil rather than questioning the supposed "purity" of the priest.

But perhaps most telling was an anecdote she included: "When a very senior cleric of the Australian Catholic Church, with significant responsibilities in addressing sexual abuse matters, expressed his views on victims who were breaking silence, I knew that I was not a Catholic, ... nor could I continue to be silent. He claimed that 'you cannot blame priests for sexual abuse, after all, we all know what little girls are like'. When I asked him what he meant

by such a statement, he responded: 'You know, sidling up to you, wanting to sit on your lap'."

The Towards Healing national protocol, which seeks to address the victims of black-collar crimes against the young and vulnerable, is now into its sixth year.

But as the Catholic Church faces possible moral and financial meltdown here and overseas, there still seems to be little enough evidence of remorse, repentance and reformation, given the church's burgeoning index of convicted predator priests and brothers and the ever-more-frequent mea culpas emanating from the senior ranks of ecclesiastical hierarchy, admitting past negligence and inaction.

With accusations of a cover-up of sex abuse now levelled at the man viewed by many as the most powerful figure in the Catholic Church of Australia, details of the crimes of some of our most notorious pedophiles and sex offenders have been resurrected by the media. Accompanying the accounts of their appalling deeds is the historical unwillingness and obvious inability of individual dioceses - most notably Ballarat and Melbourne - to stop the abuse or be truly accountable for the hundreds of damaged and destroyed lives.

The case of Gerald Ridsdale, a 67-year-old priest formerly of the Ballarat diocese, is one of the church's most damaging. It is also the case now threatening the credibility of Sydney's archbishop, George Pell.

Ridsdale was charged with numerous sexual offences against children in 1993 and 1994. He is serving 18 years' jail.

Ridsdale's nephew, David Ridsdale, has aired again allegations that in February 1993 he was asked over the phone by Pell, then auxiliary bishop of Melbourne, what it would take to keep him quiet. The offer, which Pell has denied strenuously, was allegedly made to prevent David reporting his uncle's abuse to Victorian police, who by that stage were well into an investigation of Ridsdale's reported sex offences against children of both sexes and teenage boys.

In the subsequent media coverage of the Gerald Ridsdale case and others like it, a damning account emerged of how the Victorian branches of the church handled serious allegations of child sex abuse throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s. Ridsdale and other offenders had been shuffled from parish to parish, gaining access to a fresh batch of children with each move. But with the exception of a