

The church takes abuse claims very seriously

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Accuracy and truthfulness is required when it comes to sexual abuse, Katrina Lee writes, not misleading claims.

It is a pity Judy Courtin spent so much time quoting Shakespeare instead of checking her facts in the article "Pell should face up and 'fess up " (September 24, p9) . Sexual abuse is a serious issue. All involved, especially the victims, require accuracy and truthfulness, not grossly misleading claims.

Ms Courtin takes issue with the document recently published by the Archdiocese of Sydney to explain how it responds to victims under the national Towards Healing protocol. This document was produced not to "distance and isolate" the Archdiocese or Cardinal Pell, but to address the constant misinformation circulated by commentators such as Ms Courtin.

Priests of the Archdiocese of Sydney who are accused of crimes do not receive financial assistance for their legal costs. Ms Courtin says this is "disingenuous and misleading", alleging that Catholic Church Insurances pays for this. This is false. Neither the Archdiocese of Sydney nor CCI pays the legal costs of Sydney Archdiocese priests accused of a crime. Ms Courtin also wrote of the "protectors" of abusive priests.

If she is alleging that this is the practice of Cardinal Pell or Archbishop Hart or Towards Healing, it is false and defamatory. If she has any evidence for this claim she should take it to the police.

As the Sydney document says, one of the four key principles of the response to sexual abuse is "No protection of abusers and no cover ups". The document details the way the Sydney Archdiocese and the NSW Professional Standards Office routinely report allegations of abuse to the NSW police and the NSW Ombudsman.

Why did Ms Courtin ignore these important facts? Perhaps because they contradict her arguments.

Towards Healing requires that before clergy and religious are transferred their superior must certify that they are in good standing. Strangely, Ms Courtin ignores this too.

Far from avoiding his responsibilities, Cardinal Pell has helped lead the way for the Catholic Church in responding to sexual abuse. Within months of becoming Archbishop of Melbourne in 1996, he appointed a distinguished Queen's Counsel to lead an independent commission to investigate complaints of sexual abuse against Melbourne priests. Soon afterwards the Catholic bishops and religious orders of Australia established the Towards Healing protocol to help victims of sexual abuse.

These processes are not intended to substitute for police investigations and criminal prosecutions. They are intended to assist victims after they have gone to the police, or when they do not wish to go to the police. Towards Healing and the Sydney Archdiocese encourage victims to take their complaints to the police and assist them to do so.

Nor are they intended to prevent people pursuing other avenues, including taking action in the civil courts. Towards Healing offers a way of accessing counselling, financial assistance and other support without the costs and stress of litigation. They also help victims who would have difficulty substantiating a claim to the standards required by the civil courts.

That sexual abuse has been committed by priests and other church workers is shameful and shocking. The toll for victims in many cases has been tragic.

Since 1996 the NSW-ACT Professional Standards Office (which administers Towards Healing in those jurisdictions) has received 729 complaints of sexual abuse against children. In his statement last week on behalf of Victorian church authorities, Archbishop Hart said that about 620 complaints of criminal child abuse had been upheld under Towards Healing and the Melbourne Response in Victoria. The majority of these complaints concern abuse that was committed decades ago, brought forward when the victims are adults.

It is not clear how many of these victims Ms Courtin has spoken to in her research.

Church authorities are acutely aware that nothing can compensate for the trauma and suffering which victims of sexual abuse and their families endure. The Archdiocese of Sydney is committed to bringing sexual abuse to light, to preventing it, and to doing whatever can reasonably be done to help victims in their particular circumstances. Many have expressed appreciation for the help provided under Towards Healing and the Melbourne Response.

Towards Healing is a pastoral response to victims. It aims to investigate complaints in a non-legalistic and non-adversarial manner. Many complaints, especially against known abusers, are accepted without an extensive investigative process. Towards Healing liaises with police, counsellors, lawyers and victims' advocates across six states and two territories. Participation is completely voluntary and no one is forced to take part in it. Realistically, if victims were treated by Towards Healing in the way Ms Courtin alleges it could not have continued to operate for the 16 years it has now been in place.

Towards Healing does not "lobby" against victims in any way, and the NSW-ACT Professional Standards Office routinely encourages victims to seek legal advice and assistance. The costs of doing so are often met by the church authority concerned. More often than not victims are represented by lawyers in the process.

Care is taken to explain the process to victims and to provide them with a support person during the process. In the NSW-ACT Professional Standards Office, cases are managed in an attempt to resolve them within three or four months. Sometimes delays are caused by different factors. If the police decide to investigate a matter any Towards Healing process is suspended until this is completed. Victims can seek a review of the process and findings if they wish.

Ms Courtin's assertions about the assistance available fail to take into account that assisting victims through Towards Healing is done in a personal and targeted way. Towards Healings allows for flexibility in meeting the particular needs that a victim may have for financial assistance, counselling or pastoral support.

Rather than smearing those in the church who are committed to eradicating sexual abuse and helping victims, Ms Courtin would do better to learn more about what actually happens. Uninformed discussion is a disservice to victims and the public. They deserve serious and credible research.

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