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Sexual Abuse

By + Cardinal George Pell
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16 June 2002

After last Sunday's Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral a was asked by a young woman "what words do you have for the sexual abuse victims?" My reply was: "I apologise with all my heart".

With everyone else in the Australian community a abhor the abuse and mistreatment of children. Sexual abuse of children by clergy is particularly abhorrent. Battling this evil has always been a major priority in my time as archbishop in two cities.

On June 5th the Fairfield newspaper "Advance" asked me what Jesus would say to those who put the image of the Church before the welfare of abuse victims.

a replied that "the Church response to sexual abuse must always have justice and compassion for the victim as first priority".

"Proper procedures and respect for the truth are essential. This has always been my policy. The image of the Church must always rank much lower than the needs of the people"; a especially the victims and their families.

The last couple of weeks have been difficult for the Catholic Church, especially the overwhelming majority of good priests and religious, as the sexual abuse crimes of the past years are thrown under the spotlight.

Loyal Catholics grieve for the victims and the crimes committed and the disastrous mistakes by Church leaders in dealing with them. Outsiders who do not know the Church have their darkest fears strengthened. Also it is doubtful whether these lurid accounts help the victims as they attempt to cope with their trauma.

There has been an implicit recognition that the process of investigation, by the police or by the Church, and the counselling on offer from the Church are working usefully. A pledge to continue this and do more.

As soon as a became archbishop of Melbourne in August 1996, a decided to tackle the problem of sexual abuse in the clergy. Using a wide range of expert advice, Catholic and non-Catholic, on October 30, 1996, a set up an Independent Commission to investigate, counselling services and a compensation panel. These three agencies were headed by senior lay people, two of them non-Catholic.

The procedures are working. So far in Melbourne 126 people have been compensated and 22 priests stood down. This programme of action which began a years ago has come under intense scrutiny recently.

The main attack has been on the compensation payments, especially those paid through the Melbourne process, which have been misconstrued as "hush money"; money paid to keep the victims silent. The Melbourne position is consistent and there has never been a confidentiality clause in the Melbourne "release" document for victims. The compensation procedures are designed to allow victims to avoid legal confrontation and legal costs.

In most of the rest of Australia the picture is more confusing as the confidentiality clauses used everywhere in out-of-court settlements have often been applied.

In December 2000, the Australian Catholic Bishops following the Towards Healing protocols agreed that there should not be an obligation of silence, imposed by the Church, on the circumstances around the complaint. There has been uncertainty and inconsistency in implementing this policy.

Attacks have also been made on my credibility and the principles a have followed in combating sexual abuse. A tragedy in all this would be if truth again became a casualty.

During my ambush on 60 Minutes a fortnight ago there was an attempt to entrap me with an allegation of attempted bribery by a Ballarat diocese victim when a was an assistant bishop in Melbourne.

David Ridsdale was badly abused by his uncle, Gerald Ridsdale, then a Ballarat priest. A have always sympathised with his plight and this continues today. But unfortunately he has accused me of saying on February 3rd, 1993 "what will it take to keep you quiet?" so that he would not go to the police.

His memories of what was said and offered and when and why he went to the police vary enormously. His memory has played him false.

At different times he has accused me of offering him money, or a house and car. More recently he said in a Sydney Morning Herald interview "I did not accuse Pell of offering me anything".

As an assistant bishop in Melbourne a had no authority for the Ballarat diocese and no capacity to buy a house or car for anyone.

a now know that David has admitted going to the police before 3/2/1993. Recently he conceded that he went anonymously in 1987 or 1988, and in interviews given in 1995 and 1997 he claimed he contacted the Victorian Police "Operation Paradox" in 1992.

a had no reason when he telephoned me or at any other time to try to stop him going to the police because by early February a knew the offender was being questioned by the police, had heard rumours that family members and others had been violated and had no reason to believe the offender innocent. The allegation of attempted bribery for David's silence is both mistaken and implausible. It did not happen.

Then there was the allegation that a compensation offer to a young female from the Melbourne Church solicitors

was "hush money" to keep the incident quiet. At that stage the priest perpetrator had been tried, convicted and was in prison. There was huge publicity.

This allegation is false and there was never any attempt to divert due process; people are always reminded of their right to go to the police. Of 126 victims 101 had been compensated after the priest offenders had been convicted in the courts. The other 25 cases had been dealt with by the Independent Commissioner.

a met the parents in this 60 Minutes story at a parish meeting for victims and their families. A attended two such meetings. The family did not accept the compensation offer made to them and subsequently explained that their objection was to the amount of \$50,000, more than to any non-existent confidentiality clause. The compensation procedures continued after my meeting with the parents and the family continues to receive significant counselling and other support paid by Carelink, the Melbourne archdiocese agency.

a want to reassure you that the Catholic Church views abuse by clergy most seriously and our concern for the victims is paramount.

a wish to renew the pledge a gave last week in a joint statement with the Archbishop of Melbourne.

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.

Be assured that our primary goal is to assist each and every person who has been abused to move "towards healing".

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