



17 November 2012

Letter to the People of the Diocese of Cairns

My Dear People

The Scripture readings of this 33rd Sunday strike a serious warning – yet they do hold out distant Hope:

There is going to be a time of great distress, many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace. (Daniel 12/ 1&10)

In those days, after the time of distress, the sun will be darkened, ... powers in the heavens will be shaken. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. (Mark 13/ 24&32)

Last Sunday people spoke to me of their deep concern about the ongoing scandal of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. Talking also with some priests and bishops, the same issue has been raised.

There is a high level of shame and a degree of frustration with the Church's apparent failure to deal with this.

The announcement on Monday (12th November) of a broad national Royal Commission into child abuse has brought this matter much wider comment during the week.

With the seriousness of this, you are entitled to hear from me directly.

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Despite how it may be presented, as a crisis facing the whole Church, cases of such wide-spread abuse tend to be confined to particular works and places within the Church. In this Cairns diocese, and elsewhere in Queensland, the instances of such abuse, while they have happened, do not seem to have been as prevalent as elsewhere in the country.

However, as the Scriptures this Sunday warn, there is no place for complacency!!

Seeming to relativize the problems is insulting to those who have suffered. One instance is one too many.

When it happens within a Church setting – it is a double betrayal of trust.

Complaints continue to be made about past and present abuses, as people find the courage to come forward with their concerns.

You can *never say never* on this subject. However I dare to offer you some tentative observations:

For the twenty years I have been bishop, no other matter has taken up more time at national and state meetings of Church leaders than child abuse.

Through the 1990s and early 2000s the Catholic Church in this country had been proactive, initiating strategies to help victims: (Towards Healing)¹, to prevent further violations of trust: (Integrity in Ministry)². To treat offenders and to screen candidates for ministry the bishops sponsored *Encompass Australasia* from 1997-2008. Since 2008 a private and completely independent company, *Vitality Psychology & Consulting Services Pty Ltd* ³ has provided similar valuable services.

Discrete, sensitive and, of their very nature, private (confidential) meetings took place between those who had suffered abuse and bishops and religious leaders. Difficult though such meetings were, some good was achieved and some justice done by way of compensation.

It has been the general policy to encourage people to take their complaints to police. However some people preferred not to do this for reasons, such as shame or fear or, in some instances, where the concerns might not be readily proved to be criminal!

All the serious efforts made a decade ago have not been adequate to deal with the depth and extent of the problem. Nor have the steps already taken provided adequate security for younger and more vulnerable people, as events continue to demonstrate.

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Paedophilia: adults sexually abusing children is a serious disorder in human development. An understanding of the condition is incomplete and its treatments have varied and have had limited success.

I grew up in a seemingly quiet and safe suburb (Toowong) in Brisbane in the 1950-60s. Yet at school I remember occasional warnings, even one visit from local police, against strangers who offered lollies or car rides!

Thinking back, there seemed to be vague, uneasy and usually inexplicit suspicions of what we now call the *Stranger Danger*. However the extent of long-term damage or danger to children seems to have been seriously under-estimated.

There was also that prevailing attitude and frequently stated saying: *Children should be seen - but not heard*. A child's word carried little weight - against that of any adult – let alone that of *respected* persons such as clergy, teachers, Scout leaders or sporting coaches!

Many of us grew up in somewhat *repressed* and less-than-open climate.

We are now truly shocked by the revealed extent of such past abuse and the tragic impact it has had on some people's lives.

However, now wiser with hindsight, there may be a mix of relief that such serious dangers have been revealed for what they are.

Yet there is also a sense of frustration and anger that we ourselves and our institutions, including Churches and schools, were so ineffective or naïve in the way this grave issue was so poorly dealt with – if dealt with - at all!!

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¹ *Towards Healing - Principles and procedures in responding to complaints of abuse against personnel of the Catholic Church in Australia*. Established December 1996: Revised Dec 2000: Revised Jan 2010

² *Integrity in Ministry - A Document of Principles and Standards for Catholic Clergy & Religious in Australia* June 2004. (Reprinted April 2010)

Towards Healing and Integrity in Ministry documents, together with other information can be found on the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference web site: www.catholic.org.au

³ <http://www.vitalitypsych.com.au>

In earlier times these abuses of children were regarded as isolated acts of *very bad behaviour*, which, if reported or detected, resulted in a reprimand and a removal/transfer away - for the safety of the victim! Or so it was thought!?

With a realization that this was not only wicked behaviour - but a serious pathological condition - offenders (in the 1980-90) were sent for treatment (usually overseas to U.S.A.).

After extended clinical treatment some offenders were considered *cured* and safe to be restored to ministry.

However this was soon found to be rather too hopeful and very dangerous.

Those who had seriously and serially offended were then constrained from all forms of ministry – and quietly retired under some supervision (*warehoused* – was the expression used).

However this too was soon found to be inadequate.

There are now grave doubts that some offenders' behaviour can ever be contained or controlled. This is evident in the cases of some notorious sex offenders, who, even after treatment and long prison sentences, are regarded as too great a risk to be released into the community, even under strict supervision.

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There is however a dreadful fatalism in all of this. While not all victims go on to become offenders, many who offend are found to have been once victims themselves! Hence a truly *vicious circle* can be created. This suggests that some people's psycho/sexual development towards adult maturity can become fixated or trapped by sexual experience/abuse at a particular stage of childhood or adolescence.

The scientific research is still far from certain or complete. Hence accurate detection and effective treatment and prevention are not yet available or adequate.

There also seem to be varying degrees of severity in the paedophile condition and also in the range of risk they pose to society.

At the extreme end are serious and serial offenders who are out of all control.

At the other end of the spectrum may be one who fails once, under unusual circumstances, who then must be removed from any contact with minors.

Speaking from my own more limited experiences, yet from my conversations with other bishops and religious leaders, who had to have more immediate involvement with victims and perpetrators, I can offer some observations.

Child abuse of its very nature is highly secretive and very difficult to detect and to prove. It becomes one person's word against another's – with significant disparities in age and power.

It does seem that among dioceses, where the Church has been longer established and has formed a larger and more influential sector in its particular community, there can be a more defined and developed *clerical culture*. (Ireland is a sad –case-in point!) This may give priest perpetrators more opportunities to offend, given a false sense of security and a presumed protection within such settings.

So the intensity of the problem has varied significantly across the Church and its works. Some dioceses, religious congregations and particular Catholic activities (schools and institutions) have faced many complaints, while others have had few, if any complaints.

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Why this whole matter is now again so prominent are the allegations or suspicions of *Cover-up* by the Church and other institutions where abuses have occurred.

Given the uncertain nature and causes of this condition, perpetrators are likely to be very cunning and secretive about their activities. They are unlikely to make any admissions or *confessions*. Even when confronted with strong evidence, they usually deny any wrong-doing!

As a priest now for almost forty years, I have received many sacramental Confessions in many different places and situations. Other experienced confessors would also concur that rarely – if ever – has paedophilia (or incest) been confessed. If these have been mentioned, it may have been in only very general terms. There is the centuries' old pastoral practice that confessors should not question further or press for details around sins against the VI Commandment: *Thou shall not commit adultery.*

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Perpetrators do present as plausible and popular, - yet immature types: as *kings of the kids!* In the past, such popular *pastoral front* distracted suspicion and enabled them to *groom* and gain the trust of some victims and their families.

This is targeted predatory behaviour, the real intentions of which was likely to be carefully concealed.

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At least among diocesan priests, usually living and working in their own parishes, there seems little evidence of paedophile priests organized networks.

Even where several priests in one diocese have been accused or convicted, there have been few indications of any common connections of age, appointments or friendship networks. Rather they have been more likely to cultivate a particular *personality cult* around themselves among some select people.

They stand rather apart from other mature and dedicated priests.

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There are always risks, in writing as I have, expressing any opinion and impressions at a stage, when much is yet to be investigated and researched scientifically.

However, given the gravity and extent of this issue, and the understandable wide-spread public concern and criticism of the Catholic Church at this time, I hope that what I have written may be helpful and informative.

The Australian bishops meet together in the last week of this month. This matter will be extensively considered and serious decisions hopefully will be taken.

The promised wide ranging national Royal Commission will be long-running and may bring to light ugly and distressing facts which may not be already known.

Yet this should be a saving and cleansing event.

As the Lord said:

Nothing is hidden that will not be revealed ... (Luke 8:17)

The Truth will set you free ... (John 8:32)

Yours truly in Christ,



+James Foley
Bishop of Cairns

The Towards Healing and Integrity in Ministry documents together with other information can be found on the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference web site: www.catholic.org.au