

# Facing the truth over the past 15 months

WORDS • Fr Shane Mackinlay

When the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations was announced, the Catholic Church made a submission on behalf of Victoria's four dioceses and more than 100 religious institutes.

I was involved in drafting the Church's submission, and I have been the spokesperson for the Church for the life of the Inquiry.

One of the first decisions we made was to set the guidelines for the Church's submission and engagement with the Inquiry. We decided it would be comprehensive, factual and completely open.

We called our submission *Facing the Truth*, to reflect this intent, and it repeated Church leaders' previous apologies on behalf of the Church in Victoria to victims and their families.

When the hearings got under way in October 2012, the Inquiry initially heard from academics, Victoria Police and government officials.

Then the committee heard from victims, whose hurt and pain was matched by their courage in choosing to testify. I believe that providing a platform for victims to be heard was one of the great contributions made by the Inquiry.

Church leaders eventually had their chance to appear in April. They answered questions from each member of the committee, and made a brief closing statement. They were also given the opportunity to lodge a reply to testimony and submissions made by others to the Inquiry.

Following his appearance before the Inquiry, Archbishop Denis Hart addressed a group of lay people and priests involved in Church leadership. The Archbishop acknowledged the failures of the past, set out the improvements the Church has made in the past 20 years, and discussed the Church's recommendations to the Inquiry. His speech was entitled *Leadership for Change*, and it can be viewed and read on [www.facingthetruth.org.au](http://www.facingthetruth.org.au).

This website has been the hub for all our communications with the Church and wider community during the life of the Inquiry. On it, you will find a range of fact sheets, frequently asked questions, short videos, a series of corrections of misconceptions about the Church and its practices, media statements and interviews. There are also links to submissions and rights of reply to the Inquiry and links to the Church processes for helping victims, Towards Healing and the Melbourne Response.

We proposed two reforms to the Inquiry in our original submission: extending mandatory reporting to ministers of religion; and changing the law to allow offenders to be reported to police when victims do not want to do so, while still protecting the privacy of the victim.

When Archbishop Denis Hart testified, he tabled a list of five reforms proposed by the Church—the two original reforms, plus three reforms relating to clarifying the time child victims have to take legal action, improving the Working with Children Check processes, and inviting oversight of Towards Healing and the Melbourne Response in a manner similar to the role of the NSW Ombudsman in that state.

Throughout the past 15 months the Church has been continuously available to the media, and we have tried to answer every question put to us. We have maintained our commitment to facing the truth, and to being open and honest.

One of the most important facts we have communicated is that almost all the child abuse is historical, with most occurring between 1960 and the early 1980s. We have also explained that from the 1980s onwards the Church introduced many changes to prevent further abuse from taking place.

The Church has changed how priests are screened and how they are trained, and made other improvements to prevent abuse. We introduced non-adversarial processes,



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PICTURE BY PETER CASAMENTO

and assistance to support victims and their families.

While victims are still coming forward, they all do so as adults, often decades after the abuse.

In fact, in the 12 months from 1 July 2012 to 30 June 2013, a further 53 complaints have been received by the Melbourne Response and Towards Healing that are relevant to the Inquiry. To date, of the 18 complaints received by the Melbourne Response, 13 have been upheld, and of the 35 complaints received by Towards Healing, 15 have been upheld.

Their abuse occurred across the same historical spread, from the 1940s to the 1990s, as the cases upheld to June 2012, as reported in our submissions to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry. This is further evidence that the changes we have made since the 1980s have helped to prevent the appalling abuse that had occurred before then.

Our systems are not perfect, and we are open to suggestions about how we can improve our processes and support for victims. The parliamentary committee is now preparing its report, the deadline for which has recently been extended to 15 November 2013.

Like all those in our community appalled by the life-long harm that abuse has done to victims and their families, we await its recommendations with great interest. **K**

[www.facingthetruth.org.au](http://www.facingthetruth.org.au)