



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE
OF MELBOURNE

media statement

Date: 19 October 2012

STATEMENT FROM ARCHBISHOP DENIS HART ABOUT THE COMMENCEMENT OF PUBLIC HEARINGS

The public hearings of the Parliamentary Inquiry commenced today. I am pleased that the Committee will now have an opportunity to hear directly from victims of abuse, as well as witnesses from government, experts, the Catholic Church and other religious and non-government organisations involved with children.

I look to this Inquiry to assist the healing of those who have been abused, to examine the broad context of the Church's response, especially over the past 16 years, and to make recommendations to enhance the care for victims and the preventative measures that are now in place.

Victims are our priority. We are focused on the needs of those who have been abused. Our submission to the Inquiry, **Facing the Truth**, details how the Catholic Church in Victoria responds to these needs. We listen to victims, validate their claims, and provide an apology, pastoral care, support, compensation and access to ongoing counselling.

We respect the right of victims to decide whether to take their complaints to the police. We encourage victims to report their abuse and assist those who wish to go to the police.

Many of the 618 victims of child abuse whose complaints have been upheld under the *Melbourne Response* and *Towards Healing* have in fact reported their complaint to the police, either before approaching the Church or subsequently. This is often a result of the encouragement and assistance provided to them by the Church processes.

The reasons the Church has itself not reported complaints to Victoria Police are explained in detail in **Facing the Truth** (page 116-117).

Of the cases addressed through the *Melbourne Response* (as at July 2012), 100 involved allegations against priests who were deceased at the time of the complaint. Another 99 involved complaints that had been referred to police by the victims, the majority before the victim approached the *Melbourne Response*. The reasons why the remaining victims did not go to the police are varied and are summarised in section 16.6 of **Facing the Truth** (page 115).

The Catholic Church in Victoria supports the role of Victoria Police as the appropriate authority to investigate criminal activity. This should not be confused with the Church's processes, which are focused on responding to the needs of victims and preventing further abuse, rather than prosecuting

criminal conduct. In **Facing the Truth** we make recommendations about how the Church can proactively report allegations to the police whilst respecting the rights and wishes of victims.

A Church process is started only after a victim makes a formal written statement that they do not wish to report their abuse to the police.

While the *Melbourne Response* and *Towards Healing* were established and are funded by the Church, key elements are led by independent professionals. Their record demonstrates that they meet the needs of those victims who wish to pursue their complaint other than through formal Court processes.

In relation to the *Melbourne Response*, any suggestion of a lack of independence of the Independent Commissioners is a very serious attack on the professional integrity and competence of senior members of the Victorian Bar. I reject any such suggestion.

For the past 16 years the Catholic Church in Victoria has been honest and open in its cooperation with Victoria Police. We have worked in consultation with Victoria Police, including to develop the terms of reference of the Independent Commissioner in 1996 and to revise them in 2010 and 2011. As recently as 2011 the then Deputy Commissioner of Victoria Police expressed his support of Church processes, as described in our submission **Facing the Truth** (page 62).

The written submission by Victoria Police and the evidence provided today raise a number of very serious matters which have not been expressed to us previously, and which require careful scrutiny.

Prior to the commencement of the public hearings, I wrote to the Parliamentary Committee outlining our concern about some of these matters and highlighting factual errors in the written submission. We have asked for this response to appear on the website of the Parliamentary Committee so that the public are informed.

I look forward to the opportunity to address these and other issues when I and other representatives of the Catholic Church appear before the Committee.

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