

28 JUNE 2013

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP BILL WRIGHT

TO THE PEOPLE, CLERGY AND STAFF OF THE
CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It seems like a very long time since I first declared my general support for properly established public Inquiries into the scourge of Child Sexual Abuse in our community. Since then, I have welcomed the setting up of the NSW Special Commission and the Commonwealth Royal Commission. In Catholic social teaching it is the proper function of government to act and to legislate for what we call 'the common good', and I believe very firmly that these Inquiries will greatly serve the good of the community, by establishing a clear picture of the abuse that has taken place, its often devastating effects on the lives of the abused children, why this appalling abuse was allowed to continue, and what must be done to protect children now and into the future. Accordingly, I have repeatedly committed this Diocese to co-operating fully with the State and Federal commissions, and I renew that undertaking again today.

You will be aware that the NSW Special Commission of Inquiry begins its public hearings into its second term of reference on Monday, 1st July. This term of reference concerns how officials of this Diocese have assisted or co-operated with particular Police investigations, including whether any investigation has been hindered or obstructed by the acts or omissions of church officials down the years. It should be noted that this is not an Inquiry into all allegations of child sexual abuse in the Diocese or the region. It is concerned in particular with the Police investigation of matters relating directly or indirectly to alleged child sexual abuse involving two priests, Fr Denis McAlinden and Fr James Fletcher. I understand, and I ask you all to understand, that there will be those who will be hurt or angry that their stories have not been heard or considered at this Inquiry because of its limited terms of reference. We must have them in mind too, and in our prayers.

I can say at this point that I believe the Diocese has made every effort to supply all the information that the Special Commission has sought from us, and we have given the Commission's officers access to all our files and archives.

I have been called to give evidence at the Inquiry, as have others who are or once were priests or employees of the Diocese. These next few weeks will be challenging for our church community but, again, the challenges we face and the hurt we may experience cannot be compared in any way with that of those who suffered abuse by members of this church. It is they who need our utmost support and attention at this time and from this time forward.

There has been some public concern around the fact that many victims and some others will give their evidence in camera, that is, in closed session. Please understand that this is done not by our choice but is necessary, and for good reason. I ask you then, first, to have compassion for all those affected by abuse and, secondly, to have patience while this process and the Special Commission

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of Inquiry proceed properly and painstakingly to establish the truth, to preserve the conditions for justice to be pursued, and to further the healing of victims and the better protection of children. The value and success of this Inquiry will not be measured by the size of the daily headlines, but by its final judgments upon the facts and its contribution to the future of child protection.

The body that the Church in Australia has established to assist in its engagement with the Royal Commission has been named 'The Truth, Justice and Healing Council'. Those three words encompass what we in the Catholic community surely hope for from this NSW Commission and the Royal Commission. The truth may be uncomfortable and, indeed, at some points shameful. But we need to know it, the victims need to have it known and to be able to speak it and to be heard with respect and compassion. The conditions for doing justice and for enabling healing need to be established. Let 'Truth, Justice and Healing' be our watchwords and our commitment.

Many of you will first hear or read this message at Mass. I acknowledge and give thanks to God for your faith: that in spite of all you have heard already of the crimes and sins of some priests, perhaps even men you have known and trusted, you have continued to turn to Christ for strength and inspiration. I am sure that this has been a great struggle for many of you. And in the coming weeks you will hear again of terrible things that have been done by individuals and of failures on the part of leaders and the church's administration. I pray that these very great challenges will not cause you to stumble, but rather serve to make us all grow in compassion for those who have suffered, and to remind us all of our need to open our lives deeply and daily to Christ and his grace, to 'remain in him', the true vine, cut off from whom we wither.

I thank you for all the prayers that have been offered, that I have heard as I have moved around the Diocese, for the victims and survivors of abuse, for truth and justice to emerge through the course of the Commissions, and for healing and integrity in our church and community. We must keep praying and working for these things.

Peace be with you.

Bishop Bill Wright
June 28, 2013