

THE ROYAL COMMISSION

A LETTER TO THE CATHOLIC PEOPLE FROM THE ARCHBISHOP OF PERTH



Perth, WA — 24th April 2014

Dear sisters and brothers,

The *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* will begin its public hearings in Perth on Monday, April 28th. The initial hearings are expected to last for two weeks.

Many people who have suffered terribly through the abuse inflicted on them as children and young people will relive their experience as they tell their stories to the Royal Commission. In doing so, they will demonstrate great courage and resilience. They deserve our admiration, our gratitude and our support. They also have a right to know that the Church really does recognise their suffering and genuinely apologises for the terrible things they have endured, both at the time of their abuse and through all the years they have carried these burdens with them.

As I did in November 2012 when the Royal Commission was announced, I again want to express my full support for the work of the Commission. I am hopeful that the public hearings in Perth, difficult though they will be for many, will provide an opportunity for people to finally have their voices heard. It is my hope too that when the Royal Commission finishes its work it will be able to put forward recommendations which will help all Australians, including the Catholic Church, to deal more justly, more compassionately and more effectively with this scourge of sexual abuse of children and young people.

A particular focus of the hearings in Perth will be the terrible experiences of abuse at institutions run by the Christian Brothers, especially at Castledare, Clontarf, Tardun and Bindoon. It was from these institutions that horrific stories of sexual abuse by Catholic religious brothers and others associated with the Church first emerged in our Australian context. We now know, to our shame, that this problem has been far more widespread. The curse of sexual abuse has infected the Catholic Church right around the country. Tragically, it is becoming ever clearer that it is a universal problem for the Church. We have some hard questions to answer.

The fact that we now know sexual abuse of children is a pervasive problem throughout our society does not, and must not, allow us in the Church to use this as some kind of perverse excuse. Christians hold up very high standards, and not just for ourselves. We also propose them to those who do not share our faith. It is right that we should be held to a higher standard, and that we hold ourselves to this same high standard. As a Church we have failed terribly. The perpetrators of sexual abuse have robbed so many people of their childhoods and left deep scars. Church leaders have at times failed to respond adequately when children or their parents raised the alarm, sometimes even moving abusers from one place to another, putting other young people at risk. Often children simply were not believed: they were left to grapple alone with a situation about which they were powerless to do anything.

As Church authorities became more acutely aware of the problem, often because of the bringing to light of these issues by the Media, programmes such as our *Towards Healing Protocols* were put in place. Even then victims were not and have not always been treated with the sensitivity and compassion they had a right to expect. *Towards Healing* has helped many survivors of sexual abuse, and those who have worked in our Professional Standards Office have been, and are, generous and compassionate people undertaking a difficult and demanding role. Nevertheless, mistakes have been made, processes have not always been followed, and not everyone has been able to find the healing they might initially have hoped the programme would offer.



We will hear some terrible and shocking stories over the next few weeks. They will make us wonder how institutions under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church and its agencies could have gone so wrong. The stories will also tear at our hearts as we realise the suffering inflicted on innocent and trusting young people who, in many cases, have had their lives so deeply and badly affected for so long. As a Christian community our first response must be one of absolute support for those who have experienced this abuse. We must do all we can to help people carry this heavy burden, and offer whatever assistance we can to provide a way forward for them.

We must also continue to explore *every* avenue to make sure, as far as is humanly possible, that the scourge of sexual abuse is eradicated from our Catholic community. I wish I could give you an absolute guarantee that sexual abuse will never happen again in any context associated with the Catholic Church. I cannot. Evil exists, and is powerful, subtle and deceitful. What I can do, as Archbishop, is assure not just the Catholic community but the wider community as well that we are determined to do whatever it takes to make our church communities places of safety for all, especially the young.

A letter of this kind is not the place to set out in detail all the proposals we are considering. What is important to say is this: while we anxiously await the recommendations of the Royal Commission we must be proactive in implementing any safeguarding measures we can, even on a provisional basis. It will be some time before the Royal Commission can present its final report to the Federal Government. The matter is too important for us to delay action unnecessarily.

Words are cheap and apologies can ring hollow if they are not backed up by a sincere and sustained effort to right the wrongs of the past, and to put measures in place to prevent a repeat of those wrongs now and in the future. What I can assure you of is this: the leadership of the Church in the Archdiocese of Perth is committed to doing everything we can to make sure that the future is very different from the past. We cannot undo what has been done but we can acknowledge with honesty, sincerity and humility that as a Church we have failed badly in the past. We can, and we do, express our horror and deep shame at what has happened. We can and we do humbly ask forgiveness from those whose lives have been so deeply and badly damaged by their experience of abuse. And we can, and must, continue to focus on measures which will help us to put the welfare and safety of our children and young people at the very centre of our concerns.

As we live through the experience of the Royal Commission's public hearings, I invite all of us who are part of the Catholic community to accompany with our prayers the brave men who will step forward to tell their stories. We pray that they will be able to continue the journey and find peace and hope for the future. We pray too for those who are assisting them, and for the members of the Royal Commission who are undertaking such an important task on behalf of the Australian community. And let us also pray for our Church. We desperately need repentance, healing, and conversion to a new way of being what we are supposed to be: the community of Christ's disciples. We believe that we have been given the Easter gift of hope and newness of life through God's Holy Spirit. At this time of shame and humiliation I urge you not to forget this. The truth is that many of us, in the past and in the present, have not allowed the Holy Spirit to firmly take hold of our lives and mould us into the people we are called to be. Now more than ever we need to pray again:

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and enkindle in us the fire of your love.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

The Most Rev Timothy Costelloe
Archbishop of Perth

IF YOU OR ANYONE YOU KNOW WISHES TO REPORT ABUSE BY CLERGY, RELIGIOUS AND OTHER PAID OR VOLUNTARY PERSONNEL OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA, PLEASE CONTACT EITHER THE POLICE ON **131 444** OR THE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OFFICE OF WA ON **1800 072 390** OR **admin.wapso@perthcatholic.org.au**