



THE ROYAL COMMISSION A LETTER FROM THE ARCHBISHOP OF PERTH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (visit www.perthcatholic.org.au for the full text of this letter)

Perth, 24th April 2014

Dear sisters and brothers,

On Monday 28th April, the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* begins two weeks of public hearings in Perth. Many who have suffered terribly as a result of their childhood abuse will relive their experience as they tell their stories to the Royal Commission, demonstrating great courage and resilience. They deserve our admiration, gratitude and support. The Church recognises their suffering and genuinely apologises for the terrible things they have endured, both at the time of their abuse, through to the present day and beyond.

As in November 2012, I again express my full support for the work of the Commission, hopeful that the difficult public hearings in Perth will provide an opportunity for people to finally have their voices heard. I hope that, when the Royal Commission finishes its work, its recommendations will help all Australians, including the Catholic Church, to deal justly, compassionately and effectively with the sexual abuse of minors.

The hearings in Perth will focus on truly horrendous abuse at institutions run by the Christian Brothers, especially at Castledare, Clontarf, Tardun and Bindoon. To our shame, we now know that sexual abuse has infected the Catholic Church nationwide and even universally. We have some hard questions to answer.

Knowing as we now do that sexual abuse of children is a pervasive problem throughout society does not, and must not, allow us to use this as some kind of perverse excuse. Christians hold up very high standards, ones that we also propose to those who do not share our faith. And yet, as a Church we have failed terribly. The perpetrators of sexual abuse have robbed so many of their childhoods and left deep scars. Church leaders have at times failed to respond adequately, even moving abusers from one place to another, thereby putting other young people at risk. Often children simply were not believed and left to grapple alone with a situation about which they were powerless to do anything.

Programmes such as our *Towards Healing* were put into place in part due to revelations made in the Media. Even then victims were not and have not always been treated with the sensitivity and compassion they had a right to expect from the Church. *Towards Healing* has indeed helped many survivors of sexual abuse. Nevertheless, mistakes have been made, even by the generous and compassionate people undertaking a difficult and demanding role. Regrettably, not everyone has been able to find the healing they had hoped *Towards Healing* would offer.

As we hear some terrible and shocking stories over the next few weeks, of suffering inflicted on innocent and trusting young people our hearts will be torn. As Christians, our first response must be one of absolute support for those who were abused. We must help survivors with the heavy burden they carry, and find ways forward for them.

We must also continue to explore *every* avenue to make sure, wherever possible, that the scourge of sexual abuse is eradicated. I wish I could guarantee that sexual abuse will never happen again in the Catholic Church. I cannot as evil is powerful, subtle and deceitful. However, as Archbishop, I assure you as Catholics and the wider community that we are determined to do whatever it takes to make our communities places of safety for all.

As we await the recommendations of the Royal Commission we must be proactive in implementing any safe-guarding measures we can, even temporarily. The matter is too important for us to delay action unnecessarily.

What I can assure you of is this: the leadership of the Church in the Archdiocese of Perth is committed to doing all we can to right wrongs, and to make sure that the future is very different from 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 to put the welfare and safety of all young people at the very centre of our concerns.

I invite you to join me in praying for the brave men who will step forward to tell their stories, that they will find peace and hope for the future. Please pray for those who are assisting them, and for the members of the Royal Commission undertaking such important work on behalf of the Australian community. And please pray also for our Church. We desperately need repentance, healing, and conversion to truly become the community of Christ's disciples. We have been given the gift of Resurrection hope and newness of life through God's Holy Spirit. I urge you not to forget this. However, the truth is that many of us, whether in the past or in the present, have not allowed the Holy Spirit to firmly take hold of our lives and to 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