

UPDATE 62

Royal Commission – St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol, Rockhampton



Tuesday 14 April 2015 – Day 1

The Royal Commission’s examination of the way in which the Sisters of Mercy, the Diocese of Rockhampton and the Queensland State Government responded to child sexual abuse perpetrated in St Joseph’s Orphanage, Neerkol, started in Rockhampton today.

The public case study is inquiring into the experiences of a number of men and women who were resident at St Joseph’s Orphanage between 1940 and 1975.

It is also investigating the responses of the Sisters of Mercy, the Catholic Diocese of Rockhampton, and the Queensland State Government to complaints of sexual abuse by workers, priests and nuns at the orphanage.

During the hearing 13 former residents will give evidence, along with current institute leader of the Sisters of Mercy, Sr Berneice Loch, former congregational leader Di-Anne Rowan, former bishop of Rockhampton Bishop Brian Heenan and two representatives from the Queensland State Government.

The St Joseph’s Orphanage was opened by the Sisters of Mercy in 1885 and some 4,000 children, aged from newborn up to age 15 passed through its doors before it closed in 1978.

The hearing will also hear about allegations of abuse perpetrated by now deceased priests John Anderson and Reg Durham, and a former worker at the orphanage, Kevin Baker, who denies the allegations.

Anderson was deceased before complaints came to light. In 1997 Durham was charged with 40 sexual offences perpetrated against six complainants. In February 1999 he pleaded guilty to six counts of indecently dealing with a young girl and sentenced to 18 months’ jail. Durham was also found guilty of one count of rape and sentenced to 7.5 years. This conviction was overturned but Durham was found to be unfit to face a retrial on the basis of his mental health. He died in December 2008.

In her opening statement to the Royal Commission, Counsel Assisting, Sophie David SC said an earlier investigation into the orphanage conducted by Ms Leneen Forde in 1998-99, found it had been under-funded, under-staffed and required to take in children regardless of its resources.

She told the Commission the Forde Inquiry report had found the “setting of the orphanage inevitably gave rise to a closed community with a culture of its own, with the potential for abuse in circumstances where there was a perceived need for conformity and care givers were under stress”.

Ms David said the former residents would give evidence about the abuse they suffered.

The first survivor witness, AYB, told the Commission that as a young girl she had been abused by Durham well over 100 times over many years, after he had been befriended by her family.

At the end of her evidence she said that when she first approached the then bishop, Brian Heenan, she found herself frequently confronting him.

“Once he understood the enormity of the abuse, he offered ongoing support and friendship. I am also very grateful for the pastoral care he gave to my mother before she passed away”.

AYB said she wished to acknowledge the goodness of the Sisters of Mercy of today who, she said, “have continually accepted and encouraged me as well as being supportive to so many people from Neerkol”.

“I want to acknowledge Bishop Michael McCarthy's commitment to do what he can to bring change. As Bishop Geoffrey Robinson has said, we can only hope that a better church will come about one day and that is my wish too.”

Following AYB, Mary Adams gave evidence.

Ms Adams was placed at the Neerkol Orphanage when aged 9 months. When she was 13 she was made to leave school and work at Neerkol as a domestic helper until she left the orphanage. She remained at the orphanage until she was 18 and released from care.

Ms Adams said that during her time at the orphanage she was emotionally, physically and sexually abused.

She told the Royal Commission she had been physically beaten as a form of punishment, was slapped across the face, punched and dragged around by her hair by one of the nuns.

She also described having been sexually abused by a priest, Father John at the orphanage when she was about 12 years-old, and subsequently by another priest, Father Cahill, when she was billeted out to a home in Mackay during the holidays.

The hearing will resume tomorrow. It has been scheduled to run for two weeks.

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