

UPDATE 65

Royal Commission – St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol, Rockhampton



Friday 17 April 2015 – Day 4

The Royal Commission today heard evidence from the first Church witness, former Bishop of Rockhampton, Brian Heenan, about the Diocese of Rockhampton and the Sisters of Mercy’s response to the allegations of abuse at St Joseph’s Orphanage, Neerkol.

Bishop Heenan was the Rockhampton bishop from 1991 until he retired in 2013. He had responsibility for a number of priests, including Durham and Anderson, who abused children at the orphanage.

In evidence Bishop Heenan, on many occasions, expressed his regret at the way in which he had responded when allegations of abuse were made to him by a number of former residents.

“Well, it’s all part of what I said before, a very inadequate response to the whole situation around Father Durham... a very inadequate response on my part to the situation which I regret,” he said.

He also accepted that on occasions he had put the reputation of the Church ahead of the interests of the victims of abuse.

When asked on a number of occasions if the way in which he had handled the allegations, including accepting that one victim did not want to take her claims to the police, was to protect the reputation of the Church, Bishop Heenan agreed.

After the first Neerkol allegations were raised in the Queensland Parliament in 1996 Bishop Heenan circulated a letter in his parishes, refuting the allegations of abuse as “scurrilous” and “scandalous”.

He later apologised to abuse victims when he became aware of the full extent and truth of the allegations and told the Commission again today that he will regret writing that letter for the rest of his life.

In a statement to the Commission Bishop Heenan said that in February 1997 he had written to the priests of the Diocese to inform them of Reg Durham’s retirement.

“I informed the priests that Reg Durham was charged with serious sexual offences and that he had resigned from all ministry and will no longer be responsible for public ministry at Neerkol Parish. I deeply regret the terms of this letter and its focus on Reg Durham, rather than the victims of his abuse.”

In a statement earlier in the week from Counsel Assisting the Commission, Sophie David, the Commission heard that the Diocese provided an apology to former residents of Neerkol in December 1997.

The apology followed a meeting between Bishop Heenan, the sisters and the Neerkol Action Support Group.

At that meeting, the Bishop was told how distressed some victims had been about his letter to the Diocese describing the allegations about Neerkol as 'scurrilous' and 'slanderous'.

At that meeting, Bishop Heenan apologised for the 'tone of the letter' and in February 1998, Bishop Heenan, on behalf of the Diocese, apologised to the former residents of Neerkol.

In that letter, Bishop Heenan also stated that he regretted not acknowledging those sufferings when they were first raised and that his first reaction was one of disbelief.

The hearing will continue next Monday. It is expected to conclude next week.

CONTACT: Michael Salmon 0417 495 018