

UPDATE 66

Royal Commission – St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol, Rockhampton



Monday 20 April 2015 – Day 5

The Royal Commission’s hearing into St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol continued in Rockhampton today with Bishop Brian Heenan, former Bishop of Rockhampton giving evidence about the Diocese’s efforts to improve its approach to allegations of child sexual abuse.

In 1997, US specialist, Dr Robert Grant was engaged by the Diocese to provide training and support to the Diocese and the Sisters of Mercy regarding the nature of abuse.

Bishop Heenan instigated forums in major centres in the Dioceses to raise awareness of sexual abuse and to encourage others who may have been abused to come forward.

He also appointed a Diocesan contact person to receive and respond to allegations in order to provide a reliable, consistent approach across the Diocese and from the Sisters of Mercy.

On the issue of support of priests, Bishop Heenan said his duty to support priests did not preclude him from supporting the police and the prosecution of offending priests. Bishop Heenan did in fact give statements to assist the police in the prosecution of Durham.

Bishop Heenan’s response to former residents of Neerkol included an apology issued in February 1998, a commitment to support the Neerkol Action Support Group and the taking of steps to assist victims of abuse in the Diocese. Witnesses said his role was positive, despite initial difficulties.

He outlined 13 separate structures and guidelines put in place in the Diocese since 1996 (including implementation of some national church initiatives) to strengthen protection measures and complaints handling.

In a statement outside the hearing room at the conclusion of his evidence, Bishop Heenan once again apologised to the survivors of St Joseph’s Orphanage.

“I apologise again for the harm and suffering of former St Joseph’s Orphanage residents at the hands of the Catholic Church clerics, sisters and staff. I also apologise again for the way in which I responded to these victims. I failed them and for that I will be forever sorry.”

Majella Ryan, representing the Queensland Government, gave evidence regarding records of child sexual abuse held by the State, indicating there was no evidence of policies or procedures in the archives relating to child sex abuse.

She was asked questions about the Queensland Government’s Forde Inquiry into abuse of children in Queensland institutions. The closed section of the Inquiry’s report looked at the Queensland Government’s supervision of Neerkol. It revealed that there was no real interest in inspectors exploring the conditions of the children living at Neerkol which it found had been underfunded and poorly staffed.

The Queensland Government accepted the findings of the Forde Inquiry, has acted on the recommendations and continues to do so.

In response to the Forde Inquiry, the Queensland Government established a \$100m fund in recognition of trauma children had suffered with a maximum compensation payment of \$33,000 on the condition of recipients signing a deed of release.

Sr Berneice Loch, Institute Leader of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, gave evidence in the afternoon session about emerging Church protocols in the early 1990s and the relevant consultation processes.

Sr Loch said her concern from when she first heard of abuse at St Josephs in the early 1990s was the protection of the children in the care of the Sisters and rejected the suggestion by Counsel Assisting that the focus was preventing damage to the church's reputation.

Sister Loch's evidence will continue on Tuesday.

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