

UPDATE 67

Royal Commission – St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol, Rockhampton



Tuesday 21 April 2015 – Day 6

The Royal Commission’s hearing into St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol continued in Rockhampton today with Sr Berneice Loch, Institute Leader, continuing to give evidence about the early years in which the Sisters of Mercy started to develop approaches to address sexual and other abuse perpetrated against former residents of the Orphanage.

During examination by Senior Counsel Assisting, Sophie David, Sr Loch accepted that it was a mistake to not approach a number of former residents when she had been made aware in the early to mid-1990s of the abuse they had suffered.

Yesterday, Sr Loch gave evidence that as a teacher and up to 1996 she had not received any training to help her identify or deal with allegations of child sexual abuse from either the Catholic education system or the State government education system.

Sr Loch was asked about her response to allegations made in a ministerial statement to Queensland Parliament by MP Kevin Lingard in 1996. She told the Royal Commission she had been unhappy that no effort had been made to substantiate allegations or notify the Sisters before the statement was made.

Sr Loch said however that her concern from when she first heard allegations of abuse at the Orphanage in the early 1990s was for the children, now adults, who had been in the care of the Sisters. She rejected the suggestion by Senior Counsel Assisting that her focus had been the prevention of damage to the church’s reputation.

“Most of the time about this period, we were attempting to learn a great deal more about both physical and sexual abuse. We did not have an in-depth understanding of the issue and we employed a person to really help us learn a lot more about it.

“I was well aware that...we needed a position that the congregation could endorse, not just that one person could take, and so we did put a lot of energy at this time about learning about physical and sexual abuse and its impact on people.”

She said she had been dismayed by what was happening.

“I knew that together we had to address the situation. We had to find a way forward and we had to address any wrong that had been done by us.”

When asked about legal proceedings brought by a former resident against the Sisters which was ultimately dismissed because of time limitations, Sr Loch said she had not regarded the dismissal of the case to be the end of the matter.

“I was still concerned that the mere fact that it was not going to go to court didn't actually resolve anything. If there had been offence, throwing it out of court was not any kind of delivery of justice, so it still had to be addressed,” she said.

Senior Counsel Assisting went on to ask: "And in your statement, you say that the legal process doesn't always yield the results that people want, let alone healing. Were you thinking of issues of healing at that point?"

"Oh, definitely, yes," Sr Loch responded.

Towards the end of an extended day of evidence, Sr Loch was asked by Senior Counsel for the Sisters, the Diocese and the TJHC, Jane Needham, about the effect that meeting Neerkol survivor Mr David Owen for the first time had had on her.

"It was a very moving meeting for me. I anticipated that Dave would be very antagonistic and perhaps he was when he first walked in to the room, but he was obviously also open to talking. I was open to talking with him. I found he talked about his experience I just found myself reaching back in time, really, to the little boy who had been hurt."

"And was that a revelation to you?" Ms Needham asked.

"Yes, it was," Sr Loch responded.

The hearing will continue, and may conclude, tomorrow (Wednesday).

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