

New register of priests and brothers important step forward

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This week the Australian Catholic Ministry Register reached a milestone with nearly 500 priests and male religious now registered on the state-of-the-art data based designed to make it easier for bishops and other religious leaders to check the background of priests and brothers exercising a ministry in another diocese or church body.

This is an issue that has been highlighted by the Royal Commission and is also a provision within the *Towards Healing* protocol.

In many of the Royal Commission case studies which have involved the Catholic Church we have regularly heard about priests or brothers arriving in a diocese or school without the local church leadership having any real understanding of their background, and in many cases, their history of child sexual abuse.

This might seem extraordinary but the facts are that for many years past bishops and religious leaders were all too willing to simply 'move on' child abusing priests and brothers who should have been reported to the police and put before the courts.

What we now have with the Australian Catholic Ministry Register is, for the first time, an up-to-date online database which can tell a bishop or congregation leader if a priest or brother is of 'good standing'.

For the purpose of the register 'good standing' effectively means they have all the relevant statutory background checks including a working with children check, and that there are no barriers to their being granted ministry in another place. It now provides the receiving church organisation with the ability to carry out a current check whenever desired.

At any one time there are numerous priests and brothers moving around the country.

Some are travelling to perform weddings, baptisms or funerals for family and friends others might be taking up temporary positions in schools while others might be moving to new permanent parish priest appointments.

This new data base is a huge leap forward in helping a religious leader better understand the history and status of these clerics and religious entering their diocese.

Earlier this year the first priests and brothers were listed on the register.

As I have said there are now nearly 500 on the list and hopefully within the next year or so most of the remaining priests and brothers will be registered under the authority of their bishop or congregational leader.

The Australian Catholic Ministry Register reflects a new approach to ensuring priests and brothers are accountable for their past behaviour and history.

As this register grows it will become increasingly difficult for a priest or a brother to try and hide past problems by simply moving to another part of the country.

This initiative is another clear indication of the changing face of the Catholic Church in Australia.

We are now regularly seeing religious leaders putting in place new policies, employing new people and sharply focusing their attention on ensuring their diocese or congregation is as safe as possible for children and vulnerable adults.

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