

# Royal Commission Hearing



## UPDATE 3

**11 December 2013**

*Towards Healing*, the Catholic Church's protocol for dealing with allegations of sexual abuse, is the focus of the fourth public hearing of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Sydney today. This hearing is expected to run for two weeks.

Day three of the current hearing saw retired Auxiliary Bishop of Brisbane, John Gerry take the stand. Senior Counsel assisting the Royal Commission, Gail Furness SC, sought a deeper understanding of Bishop Gerry's involvement in the Joan Isaacs case. Counsel for the Truth Justice and Healing Council, Peter Gray SC also asked questions.

While he was not directly involved in legal matters related to Mrs Isaacs' case, Bishop Gerry reflected on complex church structures, and acknowledged that Mrs Isaacs' case could have been handled differently.

Bishop Gerry said the Church needs to separate compensation and pastoral care from *Towards Healing*.

"My concern is always people need healing. Take it (compensation) out of the Church's hands and let's get on with the work of pastoral care."

The final witness in the Mrs Isaacs' case study was Archbishop Coleridge of the Brisbane Archdiocese.

Archbishop Coleridge gave evidence regarding the structure of the Church in Australia as a community of communities, the role of the Archbishop to provide oversight in the *Towards Healing* process and the procedures for dealing with convicted priests.

The Archbishop detailed the recent requirement of the Holy See to provide

information on convicted priests and the canonical change which has taken place as a result of sexual abuse. He was asked for details regarding the financial position of the Brisbane Archdiocese and the contribution of the Archdiocese to payouts for victims, in comparison with the contribution by Catholic Church Insurance.

The Archbishop provided the Royal Commission with useful insights into the issues raised in the case study and in relation to the Church's approach to child sex abuse including that the Church should consider opening up past settlement agreements where it is clear the basic *Towards Healing* criteria of treating victims with fairness and compassion haven't been met.

"This whole tsunami blew up out of nowhere. In my sense...bishops and major superiors were like rabbits caught in a headlight. They didn't know how to respond, and that's why, when a seemingly trusted and competent professional like a lawyer or an insurer came forward saying "this is the way forward", bishops and major superiors were inclined to breathe a sigh of relief and say, "Yes, you are right."

Archbishop Coleridge noted that where sexual abuse occurred there was a powerful interplay of personal and communal culpability. The perpetrator was obviously culpable. But cultural factors in the Church also converged, he claimed. And insofar as these cultural factors were part of the mix, the Archbishop said the Church bears responsibility for what has happened.

Archbishop Coleridge said clearly that the ultimate responsibility for the way in which a *Towards Healing* process goes rests with the head of the diocese or congregation involved.

"The buck stops with the Archbishop," he said.

The second case study opened on Wednesday afternoon. Mrs Jennifer Ingham read her statement which detailed her experience of *Towards Healing*. Mrs Ingham said that she was abused by Fr Rex Brown, a priest of the Diocese of Lismore, between 1978 to 1982, when she was aged 16-20 years old. Mrs Ingham's evidence is continuing.

