



CATHOLIC CHURCH RESPONSE TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: OVERVIEW

This document outlines the major initiatives by Catholic leaders in Australia to respond to the issue of child sexual abuse in Church settings. It focuses on progress in recent years. Some protocols also apply to improper sexual conduct with adults.

1987

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (Conference) dedicated part of its biannual meeting in late 1987 to the topic of child sexual abuse. The Conference the next year established the Special Issues Committee, whose role included developing protocols if an allegation of criminal behaviour was made against a priest or religious.

1989

In 1989, the Special Issues Committee drafted the *Protocol for Dealing with Allegations of Criminal Behaviour (The Initial Protocol)*. It was the first official document to provide guidance for dealing with allegations of sexual abuse. It was mainly directed at disciplining priests and religious. It stressed any Church process must not interfere with any criminal justice process. It envisaged canonical consequences for the accused, including possible dismissal from the priesthood or religious institute.

1991

The Special Issues Committee proposed amendments to *The Initial Protocol* to make it more victim-focused and less concerned with the reputation of the Church. *The 1992 Protocol* applied to all dioceses and religious congregations.

1992-93

The Conference and Catholic Religious Australia (CRA), then known as the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, issued *A Pastoral Statement on Child Protection and Child Sexual Abuse*, which acknowledged Church failures in responding to sexual abuse, including too readily accepting offenders' promises that such behaviour would not be repeated.

The Conference and CRA also issued *Sexual Offences and the Church*, acknowledging the serious and long-lasting harm caused by abuse and betrayal of trust. It pledged to give first consideration to victims and survivors and their families.

1993

In November 1993, the Special Issues Committee drafted *The Catholic Church's Principles in Relation to Sexual Abuse and Professional Misconduct*. A precursor to *Towards Healing*, it was intended to be a victim-centred response. The public document announced the Church's position – it would not tolerate sexual abuse, and would cooperate with police and victims.

1996-97

▶ The Bishops Committee for Professional Standards presented a draft of *Towards Healing* to the Conference meeting in April 1996. Towards Healing departed from *The 1992 Protocol* in several significant ways, including: opening with an apology; being victim-orientated; simplifying the document's language; simplifying the process of receiving and responding to complaints; encouraging victims to go to the police; and providing for a facilitated meeting between a victim and the Church authority. The Conference approved *Towards Healing* in November 1996, to come into operation on March 31, 1997. Catholic Religious Australia had also approved the document in principle. The first review of *Towards Healing* took place in 1999 and, by 2001, a revised version of *Towards Healing* was in operation. A second revision of *Towards Healing* was published in 2010.

▶ In October 1996, the Archdiocese of Melbourne announced the establishment of a new initiative, which became known as *The Melbourne Response*, to respond to complaints of abuse committed by a priest of the Archdiocese or by any religious or lay person working within the Archdiocese. The Response had three separate components: independent commissioners; a compensation panel; and Carelink, which provided uncapped, ongoing professional support for needs arising in relation to the abuse. As part of *The Melbourne Response*, spiritual support and guidance was also available at parish level.

▶ The Conference replaced the Bishops Committee with the National Committee for Professional Standards (NCPS). The NCPS was set up as a joint committee of the Conference and CRA, equally responsible to both, charged with general oversight and policy development of professional standards in the Church.

1997

State-based professional standards offices began to emerge from 1997. After *Towards Healing*, a national network of contact persons, assessors, facilitators and reviewers was developed. Local professional standards reference groups advised Church leaders on changes to complaints handling procedures and pastoral responses to victims and survivors.

1999

The Church released the document *Integrity in Ministry*, which outlined expectations of appropriate behaviour for priests and religious. It was reviewed in 2004. *Integrity in Ministry* was compiled "as a resource for those preparing for ministry in the Catholic Church and as a code of conduct and guide for reflection for those already involved in ministry. It sets out behaviour for clergy and religious to integrate into their day-to-day ministry and serves as a checklist against which they can review the quality of the ministerial activities in which they engage.



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2011

Integrity in the Service of the Church, for lay employees and volunteers within the Church, was developed by the NCPS. The document was created as the “parallel” to *Integrity in Ministry*, and “outlines principles of conduct for any lay person who performs paid or unpaid work in the service of the Church”. The document is a resource for reviewing organisations’ guidelines and processes.

2013

The Conference and CRA jointly established the Truth, Justice and Healing Council (TJHC) to coordinate the Church’s response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Council was comprised almost entirely of lay people, with expertise across specialised fields of child sexual abuse, trauma, mental illness, psycho-sexual disorders, education, public administration, law and governance. Among its members were survivors of abuse or people whose immediate family members had been abused. Thirty-one dioceses and 97 religious institutes had the Council represent them during the Royal Commission. The TJHC published a four-volume report following the conclusion of the Royal Commission.

2016

- ▶ Priests and deacons across Australia must be listed on the Australian Catholic Ministry Register. When a priest or deacon visits a parish, the parish priest must ask for his register number and ensure he is approved and free of any past offence. Priests must also have a Working with Children Check (or equivalent) to be allowed to work or minister anywhere, including parishes and schools.
- ▶ The Conference and CRA established Catholic Professional Standards Ltd (CPSL) as an independent company limited by guarantee to develop, audit and report on compliance with professional standards to protect children and vulnerable people. CPSL has five main functions: Develop and publish the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards; Audit compliance of Church entities against the Standards; Publicly report audit findings; Provide training, support, tools and resources to assist with implementation of the Standards; Provide advice on policy and other matters to Church Authorities. CPSL directors are lay people with professional expertise in the fields of law, education, human services, safeguarding and regulation.

LINKS AND REFERENCES

- Towards Healing: bit.ly/towardshealing
- Melbourne Response: bit.ly/MelbourneResponse
- Integrity in Ministry: bit.ly/IntegrityMinistry
- Integrity in the Service of the Church: bit.ly/IntegrityService
- Response to Royal Commission: bit.ly/ACBCCRARC

2018

- ▶ Following the completion of the Royal Commission and the Truth, Justice and Healing Council’s closure, a new group emerged to advise on and monitor the Church’s response to the Royal Commission and its recommendations. The Implementation Advisory Group (IAG) retained many of the guiding principles of the TJHC. It is made up mostly of lay people, with one bishop and one religious sister on the IAG. Its work includes: Relationships with and spiritual support of survivors; Governance and Church culture; National Redress Scheme; Handling of abuse complaints.
- ▶ On August 31, the Conference and CRA released a comprehensive response to the Final Report of the Royal Commission. The joint response outlined the Church’s commitment to reforms that would help make children and vulnerable people safer in all Catholic settings. The Church accepted 98 per cent of the recommendations that related to the Catholic Church, with some already in place and work already undertaken to implement others. The Holy See was advised of recommendations related to the universal law and practice of the Catholic Church.

2019

- ▶ Church representatives had backed a national, independent redress scheme to support survivors of child sexual abuse – seen as a way for survivors to seek redress that limited future trauma. By March 1, 34 of 35 archdioceses, dioceses and eparchies had joined the Scheme, with most large religious orders also participating.
- ▶ Archbishop Mark Coleridge attended a gathering of presidents of episcopal conferences from around the world on the issue of child sexual abuse. A number of recommendations emerged, some of which were quickly enacted, including the publication of *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, a motu proprio from Pope Francis on the investigation and reporting of abuse within Church settings.
- ▶ The Conference and CRA adopted the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards, which were developed by Catholic Professional Standards Limited. The Standards build off existing local and national guidelines and protocols, creating extra measures with particular relevance for Church settings. CPSL conducts and publishes audits of dioceses, religious institutes and other Catholic organisations.
- ▶ The IAG initiated a national review of diocesan and parish governance, fulfilling one of the recommendations of the Royal Commission. It also commenced work on the development of national policy guidelines to strengthen and standardise Church authorities’ responses to historical and contemporary concerns and allegations of abuse of children and vulnerable adults.
- ▶ The Conference and CRA established the Safeguarding Steering Committee to develop a national operational model for safeguarding and professional standards. The goal is a model that is responsive to needs, specific to Catholic entities and communities, free of duplication both within the Church and with civic structures, and suited to appropriate delivery at local, provincial or state/territory and national levels. The Committee includes laity, religious and a bishop.