



OFFICE OF
BISHOP WILLIAM WRIGHT

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE FROM BISHOP BILL WRIGHT, ON THE RELEASE OF THE REPORT OF THE NSW SPECIAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO MATTERS RELATING TO THE POLICE INVESTIGATION OF CERTAIN CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ALLEGATIONS IN THE DIOCESE

Bishop Wright's letter relates to the Special Commission of Inquiry's report in relation to the second term of reference:

"...whether, and the extent to which, officials of the Catholic Church facilitated, assisted, or co-operated with, Police investigations of relevant matters, including whether any investigation has been hindered or obstructed by, amongst other things, the failure to report alleged criminal offences, the discouraging of witnesses to come forward, the alerting of alleged offenders to possible police actions, or the destruction of evidence."

Almost one year ago, on 1 July 2013, at the commencement of the public hearings into the second term of reference of the Special Commission of Inquiry I made a public apology to the victims of Denis McAlinden and James Fletcher, to their families and friends and to the entire community. It was a detailed statement and I have attached a copy of that apology with this open letter so that you can read it in its entirety. As the Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle, it is my responsibility to articulate the tremendous regret that I personally, and we collectively, feel when our brothers and sisters were brought into harm's way by the failings of our Diocese's former leaders.

Cooperating with the investigations conducted by Commissioner Cunneen stretched the capacities of the Diocese and tested our endurance. That was as it had to be and I believe it will be clear to anyone who reads the Commissioner's report; no punches were pulled when it came to the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle or anyone in it. For me and others in this Diocese it is a bitter experience reading this report. Nevertheless, the Special Commissioner and her entire team has my utmost respect for the rigorous and professional approach that they have maintained through this difficult 18 months process, which is now completed.

Commissioner Cunneen's report is a significant, complex document and the breadth and depth of the report is testimony to the thoroughness of the inquiries conducted. As the Diocese has only recently obtained copies, it will take us a number of days to read through the report thoroughly. I feel certain that the bulk of the report, as it relates to the second term of reference, will not be a

revelation to me. I believe that the report will address issues that the Diocese has acknowledged and struggled with for many years now, and will continue to work through for many years to come. I suspect that some of the particular detail will be news to me and others. I and the Diocese's leadership team will address the implications of any previously unknown facts, adverse findings and recommendations in due course; once we have had the opportunity to undertake the detailed analysis a report of this significance warrants. In particular, the Diocese's child protection team are scouring the report for any additional lessons that we can learn to improve our practices in protecting children and working with those who were harmed in the past.

Commissioner Cunneen's report is wholly independent and I believe it will detail a forensic investigation of the actions and failures of Diocesan leadership to protect children and, in relation to McAlinden, stop a known predatory paedophile from causing further harm. Whilst we must judge a person's actions by the standards of their time, that does not alter my feelings of deep and abiding shame for the actions and inactions of my predecessors. I know that the report will make very difficult reading and it may invoke strong feelings for some; feelings of anger, disgust, sadness, frustration and betrayal. We were not the only church to have had abusive priests and we were not the only institution to have failed to protect children; however none of that relieves us of the historic realities that we as a Diocese are now working through to address in a just and faithful manner. I believe that Commissioner Cunneen's report is a significant step in that process.

I also feel a sense of hope, based on the fundamental goodness of people, the enduring strength of our Catholic faith and our capacity as a community to learn from our past failings and to rise above them. Our Diocese continues to invest significant resources into systems and personnel designed to protect our children and work with those who have been harmed, to explore new pathways towards healing. The Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle has learnt, and is continuing to learn, from the mistakes of the past and, as we come to terms with Commissioner Cunneen's report, I call on each and every member of the Diocese to renew their personal commitment to care and protect our most vulnerable community members; our children, frail aged and those with special needs.

Over the coming days and weeks I will speak to you again and will ensure that you have opportunities to discuss this report with the Diocese's leadership. Information sessions will be held across several locations, which will be open to all members of the Diocese to attend. Those within our Diocese will be communicated to by both myself and other members of the Leadership Team. In addition, the Diocesan website will provide ongoing access to any of our public messages and information, and on behalf of the Diocese I will hold a press conference to address the media.

After this period of media interest and the important discussions that we will have within our Diocese, it is my intention to make no further public comment on issues addressed by Commissioner Cunneen's report. However, I and many other dedicated personnel in the Diocese, particularly the Healing and Support Team of Zimmerman Services, will continue to work with those who have been harmed by child sexual abuse. That work will continue to be done, as it has been for many years now; respectfully, privately and, as far as is possible, in the time and on the terms set by the person who was harmed.

May I end by assuring all those who may find this report to be a source of further distress, that my thoughts and prayers are with you and will be with you in the coming days.

Yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and the name 'William Wright'.

Most Reverend William Wright
Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle

+WW/ed

Friday, 30 May, 2014

A Public Acknowledgement and Apology from Bill Wright, Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle

This public acknowledgement and apology has been prepared as part of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle's response to the Special Commission of Inquiry Concerning the Investigation of Certain Child Sexual Abuse Allegations in the Hunter Region ('Special Commission of Inquiry'). Bishop Wright does not speak for any other diocese, order or organ of the Catholic Church in Australia; this submission is his and that of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle ('Diocese') alone.

As Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle I wish to make an unreserved apology on behalf of the Diocese to all those who have suffered as a result of acts or omissions by members of this Diocese in relation to the matters before this Special Commission of Inquiry.

My apology must begin with an acknowledgement of the wrongs done. I acknowledge that two men, Denis McAlinden ('McAlinden') and James Fletcher ('Fletcher'), now deceased but once priests of the Diocese, repeatedly committed acts of sexual abuse of children.

I acknowledge that these sexual predators used their position in the Diocese to gain access to these children and to conceal their acts.

I acknowledge that the children so abused sometimes suffered further hurt when they were not believed because the offender was a priest.

I acknowledge that, when matters were reported, church authorities sometimes failed to act, or to act effectively, to support abused children and their families or to ensure that other children were protected from abuse by these offenders in the future.

I acknowledge that victims of McAlinden and Fletcher, and their families, sometimes suffered also from the attitudes and actions of some in the Catholic community towards them when they told their stories.

I acknowledge that the abuse perpetrated by McAlinden and Fletcher, exacerbated on occasion by the failures of church leaders, caused real and enduring harm to

those children who were abused, to their families, and to many others who have been affected by this sorry history in their community.

I am totally committed to the care and nurturing of children in safety and love. I find the wilful harming of children for personal sexual gratification abhorrent. I feel outraged and disgusted at the sexual assault of children by men who betrayed their positions of trust, their sacred calling and the basic tenets of our Christian faith.

And so, as Bishop, I apologise unreservedly on behalf of the Diocese to those who suffered abuse, to their families and friends, and to all who have been subsequently harmed by the unfolding of these matters. My apology is intended to express the deep sorrow of the Catholic community that such things ever happened to people in our church; our desire that the victims now have the chance to tell their stories with confidence of acceptance and are able to obtain justice to the extent that this is possible; our commitment to assisting those who were abused as best we can; and our commitment to doing all in our power to protect children from such abuse now and into the future.

I am not currently in a position to comment as to the specifics of the facts relating to McAlinden or Fletcher, nor the management of their matters by leaders of the Diocese of Maitland¹ or other persons in the wider Catholic Church or Police. I was not in the Diocese at the times these events occurred and until I became Bishop I had no personal knowledge of these matters. These issues are rightly for the Special Commissioner to address and investigate and I, for my part, approach these investigations with an open mind.

To both the Police involved in Strikeforce Lantle and Counsel Assisting the Special Commissioner, I have and will continue to direct all Diocesan personnel to provide all possible hospitality and logistical support to facilitate access to any relevant records held by the Diocese and to endeavour to make the Diocese and all its constituent services as transparent as possible to ensure that all relevant material comes to light.

I welcome public inquiries such as this Special Commission of Inquiry and the forthcoming national Royal Commission. It is my hope that, beyond establishing the facts of what has happened in the past and contributing to improved child protection regimes now and into the future, such inquiries will contribute substantially to raising community awareness of the damage done by child sexual abuse. I hope that this increased social understanding of the problem will in turn reduce the sense of isolation experienced by victims of abuse and the reluctance

¹ *The Diocese of Maitland was founded by Papal decree on 27 May 1847. It was not until 14 June 1995 when the diocese was renamed the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.*

that still exists in the broader community to report abuse whenever or wherever it occurs.

I and the Diocesan leadership team are committed to the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children. Bishop Michael Malone was determined that past wrongs and errors were not repeated. I have continued to commit significant and ongoing resources to Zimmerman Services, which is a specialist child protection unit within the Diocese; reporting to statutory authorities, investigating allegations of abuse and providing innovative, personalised healing and support services to people affected by the history of child sexual abuse within the Diocese.

I thank the Special Commission of Inquiry for undertaking this vital task.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bill Wright", with a small cross symbol to its left.

Most Reverend Bill Wright

BISHOP OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE