

A SHINING LAMP THAT ILLUMINES EVEN OUR SHADOWS

In a landmark move, Congregational Leader of the Sisters of Mercy New Zealand, Katrina Fabish, has joined as a representative of Catholic religious with Bishop Pat Dunn, president of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference in writing a letter about the Royal Commission of Inquiry into historical abuse in State care. The letter was written to the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, the Minister for Children, Tracey Martin, and the chair of the newly formed Commission, Sir Anand Satyanand.

Although Sir Anand is still in the process of consulting widely about the terms of the Commission, in announcing its formation the Prime Minister indicated her preference for a focus solely on children who were abused while in State care.

In their letter, the two Catholic signatories offered their full support for the work of the Royal Commission. “Like others, we are deeply disturbed when we learn of historical or current abuse that has occurred in institutions, including any run by Churches.” They agreed that investigation by the Commission “is the way to learn lessons for today and the future, and continue to work towards healing.”

The pair also called for a broadening of the Inquiry’s terms of reference. “We are of the view that when the Commission’s work turns to the institutions themselves, included among them should be a range of Church institutions. In this way, we too will be active contributors and learners within the Royal Commission of Inquiry.

“We assure you once again of our support and our desire to learn from this national undertaking which we are confident will contribute positively to the strengthening and safeguarding of our whānau, communities and society.”

Many will detect a sea change here in the attitude of church leaders to this issue. From a time not so long ago when the problem would have been denied or covered in a veil of secrecy, bishops and leaders of religious Congregations are much more ready to admit the shadow side of our institutions, and to work at creating pathways for truth, reconciliation and healing to occur.

Our commitment to the gospel requires nothing less, nor does our desire to honour te Tiriti o Waitangi. When Māori are so highly represented in the numbers of those who have experienced abuse and violation, the path of hohou rongo or reconciliation, with its promise of mana and tapu restored, is too important to be ignored. Honouring



te Tiriti involves a willingness to make systemic change to our organisations, and to replace failing systems with what our bishops described in 1990 as ‘new structures of grace’.

Credit must also be given for the work already done by our church to create a new culture of care for the young and vulnerable. The establishment of a National Office for Professional Standards has been matched in some instances by individual religious Congregations forming professional standards groups of their own; a key factor in their success has been the appointment of competent non-religious or lay persons to these bodies. The production in 1993 and successive revisions of *Te Houhanga Rongo - A Path to Healing*, a set of clear principles and procedures for responding to complaints of sexual abuse by clergy and religious, has been a vital tool in this process.

Other helpful resources have included a National Code of Ethics for Church Volunteers (2003), and *Hikoi Tahī - Journeying Together* (2006), which sets standards for ministries to youth and young adults. The national office also promotes a set of guidelines for preventing and responding to sexual abuse in the Catholic Church of New Zealand, with particular focus on safe recruitment, formation and training, and on community awareness-raising and education. The guidelines were adopted by a Mixed Commission, representing the Catholic bishops



Director of New Zealand Catholic Professional Standards Office, Ms Virginia Noonan.

and Leaders of religious Congregations in New Zealand. Since February this year, the direction of the National Office for Professional Standards has been in the hands of Christchurch former lawyer and mother of two, Virginia Noonan, who also serves on the board of Sisters of Mercy New Zealand Ministries Tiaki Manatū Trust.

For the record, Sisters of Mercy cared for orphans from the time of their arrival in New Zealand in 1850 until trends in social policy in the 1970s saw a shift from institutional care to a more family-centred approach. Other Catholic Congregations provided long-term hospital care for children and young people with multiple disabilities, residential care for the profoundly deaf and for troubled adolescents referred by the justice system. By today's standards, these ministries were often inadequately funded, managed and staffed by religious with little or no specialised training. Some of the Orders have faced claims for damages, and one or two now have a formal apology displayed

on their website, addressed to those who were neglected or abused while in care.

Let the last word in this reflection be from our founder, Catherine McAuley who instructed that her sisters "should be shining lamps giving light to all around us." Perhaps the Royal Commission of Inquiry into historical abuse may help us to shed light on our failings in the past, to ensure greater safety for those in our care today, and for all those who may look to Mercy for support in the future.

Taihoa, spare a moment.....

Spend a moment or two, reflecting on your own or with a colleague on the questions below. If there is a chance, do share your responses with a group or ministry of which you are part.

- *In our current Mercy ministry, to whom do we have a particular duty of care? Are there ways in which this care has sometimes fallen short of our ideals?*
- *What systems are in place to ensure that the care we offer is of the highest possible level? How have we managed to improve the quality of our care in recent times?*
- *What changes would you like to see set in place, to improve the safety and care of those who depend on us?*

– **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer

Healing for past and future

*E te Mārama ki te ao nui,
God who enlightens our whole world:
In Jesus whom you sent as our light
we learn how to love, and how to be
healed and forgiven when we fail.*

*Send you Spirit once more into our hearts,
that we may renew the face of our Earth.
Help us to recognise those who have been
wounded, and their mana diminished,
when our care has fallen short.*

*Bless the work of the Royal Commission
as it begins its inquiry into abuse of
those entrusted to State care.
May this process bring healing for
past, present and times to come.
Amen.*