



For all things give thanks.

1 THESS 5:18

STATEMENT FROM BISHOP BRIAN MASCORD POPE FRANCIS AND BISHOPS MEETING IN ROME ON CHILD ABUSE

I have been following with interest the news reports from the recent meeting in Rome between Pope Francis and the presidents of bishops conferences worldwide, along with leaders of religious orders, heads of Vatican agencies, and, most importantly, survivors of abuse.

Leading up to the meeting, Australian conference president, Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, said, “Words are no longer enough”—it’s the actions that follow that are more important. That’s something we have been learning and relearning over the past five years in Australia during the Royal Commission. It has helped provide key elements of a road map that we hope will continue our efforts to ensure a culture of safety in our diocese.

The recent meeting in Rome is a step in the right direction with a number of promising actions, including a new set of laws and guidelines concerning child protection for the Vatican City State, the creation of task forces of experts to help struggling countries and dioceses, and a new handbook for bishops that clearly sets out their duties and tasks when handling abuse cases. As Archbishop Mark said, “There will be no excuse for saying I didn’t know. It will be set out in black and white in this handbook.... That principle is crystal clear and shared by all who were at the meeting this week.” However, I think the meeting is part of a longer journey with many steps in the future.

A few months ago, we hosted a conference in the diocese where 600 people came together to listen to one of the Vatican’s leading experts on the safeguarding of children and vulnerable people, Fr Hans Zollner SJ. There were survivors, clergy, religious, school principals, teachers, parishioners, volunteers and Church employees present. During the conference, Fr Hans said that child protection “needs to get into our system, our core, our heart. Safeguarding needs to get into the DNA of the Church”. That really brought home to me, once again, that concrete actions must become part of our DNA.

This is something that we have been trying to do in the diocese over the past two decades in our parishes, schools, ministries and welfare services. We have been resolute in ensuring that concerns or allegations brought forward are responded to with sensitivity and determination. We have rigorous processes in place for dealing with complaints of abuse, and we give full cooperation to all police investigations and child protection authorities.

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In recent times, at the end of the Royal Commission, our diocese was fortunate to employ a new director of professional standards and safeguarding, Ms Anna Tydd, who worked for the Royal Commission. Anna brought with her a vast amount of experience and excellent concrete actions for us to employ based on the Royal Commission's recommended *10 Child Safe Standards*. Anna's expertise was recently recognised by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Anna is now heading-up the Implementation Advisory Group, which is the Church's national body responsible for monitoring the response to the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission.

Anna's replacement in the diocese, Ms Asante Viswasam, brings with her a wealth of knowledge and experience from her time working at the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian and more recently with the Diocese of Parramatta.

Together, our directors have implemented a new training and education program that requires each person in positions of leadership within the diocese to undertake a minimum of 10 units of training per year in child protection and professional standards. Some of these training modules have included sessions presented by survivors of abuse focussing on the challenges they face and how they can be supported. Upcoming modules will include training and education on how to engage with children and vulnerable people. The purpose of this is to ensure that their voices are heard as part of the ongoing decision-making processes of the diocese.

We are also in the process of putting the finishing touches on a new child protection and safeguarding manual that will ensure our diocese is implementing best practice when it comes to our policies and procedures.

In the interests of transparency, we will be also publishing an annual report on data relating to the work of the diocese's Office of Professional Standards and Safeguarding (OPSS), including investigations undertaken, safeguarding initiatives, and identified trends and patterns.

Other concrete actions that we are in the process of implementing in accordance with the *Royal Commission's 10 safe standards* include a professional supervision program for clergy. The OPSS will be an ongoing resource to parishes and agencies across the diocese to ensure compliance and the proper implementation of policies and procedures.

We have already made much progress in the diocese, but we realise that we can never be complacent, and we need to continue our efforts to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable people.



Most Rev Brian G Mascord DD
BISHOP OF WOLLONGONG
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