



For all things give thanks.

1 THESS 5:18

Response from Bishop Brian Mascord on questions from the Sunday Telegraph

How does the bishop plan to restore faith in the congregation after the Royal Commission and the recent conviction of Cardinal Pell?

The marked collapse of the credibility of the Catholic Church as an institution as a result of the sexual abuse crisis cannot be ignored or underestimated. For our congregation—whether by their belonging to a local parish or by their association with one of our Catholic schools or agencies—I understand the hurt, confusion, anger and other emotions that many may feel at this time. The abuse of children by those ordained to represent the love and mercy of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, is a profound betrayal of people entrusted to their pastoral care. So, I understand why many in our congregation have been asking the question, “Why do I want to be identified with such an institution?”

I think the answer to this question lies at the heart of any attempt to restore faith and trust. Our faith, as Catholics, should never be in bishops or buildings, procedures or policies, saints or the status-quo. Our faith should always be in the risen Jesus who is the reason for our hope—our Way, our Truth and our Life (cf. John 14:6). All our responses, actions and reactions to the abuse crisis should be centred on Jesus. It is precisely because this has not always been the case in the past that so many innocent people have been betrayed.

We have shown that while we can be powerful instruments of God’s love in the world, we can also be God’s worst ambassadors when we cause harm to those around us, especially to the most vulnerable. So, if we have any chance of restoring faith and trust, we need to draw closer to Jesus and become powerful instruments of his love again in the way that we protect and care for each other.

So, how do we do this in relation to child protection and safeguarding? The first step is to take full responsibility for our own moral corruption and to give support to those who have been abused, and to ensure, in very practical ways, that our children and vulnerable people are safe in our communities. For victims and survivors of abuse, recovery from such trauma can take a lifetime, if at all. As a new bishop and a new resident in the Diocese of Wollongong, I am committed to doing my best to help heal the deep wounds of the past in the diocese. I am currently looking into creating an independent healing and support team—like the one offered in my previous diocese of Maitland-Newcastle—that provides services to survivors that are open-ended, where no time limit is imposed, and the person is simply welcomed, supported and accepted.

The second step is to back-up our words with concrete actions. 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 our diocese over the past two decades in our parishes, schools, ministries and welfare services. We have by no means been perfect in this area, and I do not wish to appear as though I am boasting, or to pretend that we must be anything other than vigilant, now and in the future. However, we are 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 report and give full cooperation to all police investigations and child protection authorities.

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 our 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 a position 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 to ensure that the voices of children and vulnerable people 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 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 Child Safe Standards* include a professional supervision program for clergy and other

leaders in the diocese. 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 if we are to ever restore faith and trust. As Scripture says, "A tree will be known by its fruit" (Luke 6:44).

Have parishioners left the faith as some bishops have suggested?

To look at the situation objectively, one must admit that, yes, there are parishioners who have left the Church because of what has happened—as is their right. For those who have left, some have not let go of their faith in God, while for others, it has been the last straw. To be a stumbling block to another is a grave error. As if the evil committed against children and vulnerable people were not enough, to discover that the actions of some have caused people to turn away from God is heartbreaking, and those responsible will be rightly judged for this.

But, many have stayed and continue—in the struggle of making sense of what has happened—to live faithfully the mission that has been entrusted to them by their baptism. We recently celebrated Ash Wednesday, the commencement of the 40 days of lent where those gathered at Mass received ashes on their forehead in the shape of a cross as a symbol of the dust from which God made us. It is a very public act of faith to walk around for the rest of the day with a cross on your forehead. As I was walking to the cathedral to celebrate the midday Mass, I was wondering how many would show up, especially in light of recent events. To my surprise, the cathedral was completely full, and I was truly overwhelmed as I gazed upon the hundreds of people who were gathered together to make this public statement that they were Catholics. Their statement confirmed me in my faith that day. I spoke to other priests in the diocese and they reported the same experience.

The next day, I celebrated the annual Education Mass—as part of Catholic Schools Week—where some 800 Catholic educators from all corners of our diocese came together to celebrate, not just who we are, but what we believe in. Again, it was an emotional time for me personally, especially when our director of schools, Mr Peter Turner, addressed the congregation with the words, "The future has a name, and that name is hope."

We are a diocese of hope. The results of the recent *National Church Life Survey* showed that across

the diocese, we are a people who have a deep love for the Eucharist, of vibrant worship, of praying for and serving one another, and we have a strong desire for communities of deeper belonging. Over the past couple of years, we have been looking at ways of growing this desire through parish renewal strategies and reaching out to the disconnected through programs like Alpha (a 12-week introduction to Christianity) and focussing heavily on vibrant youth ministry initiatives, especially in our schools. Over 700 people have attended Alpha in our diocese, with a number of our parishes now running their fifth or sixth program.

We produce annual books for Advent and Lent that include daily reflections. The purpose of these little books is to help the reader refocus their faith in Jesus. This year we sold close to 50,000 copies throughout Australia and we also provide them free of charge to thousands of inmates in prisons as part of an outreach program.

It is this hope that drives my desire, broken as we are, to become the Church that Jesus calls us to be—a place of healing and hope, welcome and mission. Trust is not easily created, but is easily lost, and I believe that it is only through a visible witness of Christ-like love, and a recommitment to protecting the vulnerable, that will we begin to repair the damage done.

Does the bishop feel that church structure has to change?

Yes, I do believe that the structure has to change, but how that will happen, I am uncertain. Plenary 2020 will give us the opportunity, here in Australia, to discuss how this might happen. In many ways, the plenary will give leaders a chance to hear how this is already happening in various places throughout our country in the area of lay leadership, women's roles in leadership, and decision making. There are many parishes in our country that no longer have resident priests, but the parishes are being led by lay men and women who are keeping the life and prayer of the community alive and active.

What is the future of the Catholic Church given the revelations of the Royal Commission?

Recognising that there have been people in the Church who have damaged the lives of others, we now have a profound opportunity to look at ourselves and embark anew. We proclaim the same message of the joy that we have in living in a relationship with Jesus Christ—that message hasn't changed in over 2,000 years, and it will never change.

But, we have opportunity now to do all we can—quietly, humbly and respectfully—to bring some healing and some hope to those who have been hurt and a determination to take all steps necessary to make our children and young people—actually, all people—safe in our communities. Finally, we have the opportunity to get back to the basics, and for all of us, to remember and truly live again what the name “Catholic” means—someone who really believes that Jesus is our Way, and our Truth, and our Life.

Yours in Christ



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