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Scale of abuse in NZ Catholic Church revealed in new research

The scale of reported alleged abuse within the Catholic Church in Aotearoa New Zealand has become known for the first time from extensive research undertaken by the Church at the request of the Royal Commission on Abuse in Care.

A total of 1680 reports of abuse were made by 1122 individuals against Catholic clergy, brothers, nuns, sisters and lay people from 1950 to the present, with 592 alleged abusers named. Almost half the reported abuse involved sexual harm. The 1960s and 1970s were the decades with the most abuse reported, with 75 per cent dated before 1990.

The results of this research have been requested by and provided to the Royal Commission. The definition of abuse used is the one used by the commission and includes reports of sexual, physical, emotional, psychological and neglect.

The research was undertaken by Te Rōpū Tautoko, the group that coordinates Church engagement with the Royal Commission. Te Rōpū Tautoko encourages anyone who has suffered abuse in the care of the Church to approach the Police, the Royal Commission, the Church's agency for managing reports of abuse (the National Office for Professional Standards, or NOPS), or one of the many support groups and networks that exist for survivors.

Te Rōpū Tautoko sought and examined records in an Information Gathering Project from the country's six Catholic dioceses and from 43 Catholic religious congregations (also known as religious institutes, orders or associations). The research included records of 428 Catholic parishes, 370 Catholic schools and 67 other care institutions. The findings include:

- Of the 1274 Catholic diocesan clergy (those who work under a bishop, not for a congregation) who have worked in New Zealand since 1950, 378 reports were made about 182 (14 per cent) of those clergy.
- Of the 2286 male congregational members (brothers and priests belonging to a congregation) who have worked here since 1950, 599 reports were made about 187 (8 per cent) of them.
- Of the 4247 female congregational members (sisters or nuns) who have worked here since 1950, 258 reports were made about 120 of them, or 3 per cent.
- A total of 138 allegations of abuse were made against 103 mostly lay staff, volunteers and similar people involved with the Church.
- Of the 1680 complaints, 1350 involved children and 164 involved adults, with the age of a further 167 not established by the research. Of the 1680, almost half (835) were reports of sexual harm against a child. Of the total, 687 relate to educational facilities, 425 to residential care, 228 to parishes and 122 to other locations. A further 219 were at unidentified locations.

Te Rōpū Tautoko acknowledges that the records will not represent all abuse that has happened in the care of the Catholic Church, as the research only covers recorded reports. Not all the reports of alleged abuse found during the research resulted in police complaints or criminal convictions. Not all the reports were upheld at the time they were made, or subsequently, but many were.

Not all the alleged abusers were identified – 308 of the reports were against unidentified people. A total of 1296 reports were against 592 named alleged abusers. Of those 592, 393 had one report about them, 143 had two to four reports, 40 had five to nine, 10 had 10 to 14 and six had 15 or more. Those six accounted for more than 10 per cent of all reports of alleged abuse.

Catherine Fyfe, Chair of Te Rōpū Tautoko, says: “Church leaders are committed to ensuring transparency. Consistent with this principle, we have published this information now, as soon as the work on it has been completed. It is important to note that the extent of reports of abuse in the Catholic Church in Aotearoa New Zealand has not been collated before now. The Information Gathering Project was a major exercise involving dozens of people over two years, including searching paper files dating back 70 years in hundreds of places.”

Sister Margaret Anne Mills, President of the Congregational Leaders Conference of Aotearoa New Zealand (representing Catholic religious orders and similar entities), says: “Each piece of data represents many people’s lives. Much of it represents terrible harm committed by one person on another. We can never forget that. Being involved in being part of healing that harm, as much as is possible, is, and needs to continue to be, our focus. All Church leaders need to urgently understand and acknowledge our shared history; understand and acknowledge the shocking impact of abuse in church settings on victims and their families; understand what it means for survivors and our faith communities; and act today.”

Cardinal John Dew, President of the NZ Catholic Bishops Conference, says: “These statistics on abuse in the Catholic Church going back to 1950 are horrifying and something we are deeply ashamed of. I am grateful that so much work has been done in researching the details and making them public. As we continue to respond to the Royal Commission into Abuse and we build a safer Church for everyone, I firmly hope that facts like these will help us to face the sad reality. The Church will learn from this and affirm its commitment to the work of safeguarding.”

The publication of the research comes shortly before the Royal Commission is scheduled to start hearings that will investigate events at Marylands School in Christchurch. Marylands was a residential school for boys, many with disabilities, run from the 1950s to 1984 by the Hospitaller Order of St John of God brothers. The commission is also looking into any abuse by the brothers at Hebron Trust, a Christchurch facility for at-risk youth operated by one of the brothers, and abuse by the brothers at Marylands against residents of the neighbouring St Joseph’s orphanage run by the Sisters of Nazareth.

In total, 236 reports of abuse relate to Marylands School and the Hebron Trust. That represents 14 per cent of all the abuse complaints compiled in the research. The three most prolific offenders worked at Marylands, and the most prolific offender went on to establish the Hebron Trust. A further 239 reports of abuse (also 14 per cent of the total) relate to St Joseph’s Orphanage and Nazareth House, Christchurch. Half of those reports do not identify an offender.

Attached: A Fact Sheet from Te Rōpū Tautoko giving further details of the results of the Information Gathering Project.

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