



30 November 2020: Part one of the faith-based redress hearing

Opening statement on behalf of the bishops and congregational leaders of the Catholic Church in Aotearoa New Zealand given by Sally McKechnie

Mōrena, Chair, Commissioners. As the evidence this week will be focused on the Catholic Church, I have been invited to give an opening statement now and I thank you for that opportunity.

I begin by acknowledging Madam Chair, Commissioners, Counsel Assisting, fellow counsel, those in the public gallery, and those watching elsewhere. In particular, the bishops and congregational leaders of the Catholic Church of Aotearoa New Zealand acknowledge the survivors of abuse who have made the courageous and difficult decision to give evidence before this Inquiry this week and those survivors of abuse who are watching this hearing, either here in the room or remotely.

I appear as counsel for Te Rōpū Tautoko, on behalf of the Catholic Bishops and Congregational Leaders. Te Rōpū Tautoko was created to co-ordinate the six Catholic Dioceses and 43 Catholic Congregations' response to the Royal Commission. Commissioners, this was necessary because each of the dioceses and congregations are independent of each other. There is no single entity or authority that is "the Catholic Church" or "the Catholic Church in New Zealand".

Instead, the Catholic Church is a collect of people, communities, organisations, institutions, and entities who are all connected by their faith.

There are many others who have engaged with the Catholic community, as Counsel Assisting said in her opening, through the schools and other services that the Catholic community provides to the general community in New Zealand. In creating Te Rōpū Tautoko and requesting to participate in this Inquiry, each bishop and congregational leader committed to its key set of principles which will guide their work before you in this Inquiry.

Commissioners, those are summarised in the statement before you, are publicly available on the website that has been created to support the work of the Church and the Commission, and are accessible to survivors or members of the public who wish to see them.

Ultimately, the Inquiry, the survivors and Bishops and Congregational Leaders of the Catholic Church share the same goals: the complete elimination of all forms of abuse for those in care and ensuring the survivors of abuse obtain the support that they need. The Catholic Church is very committed to the transformation of care in all settings, so Aotearoa New Zealand is a safe place for all people.

Commissioners, the hearing over the next fortnight is about redress. The redress process begins when a survivor comes forward to share their experience of abuse with the institution responsible for that behaviour. In the Church's experience, this is often an ongoing process, sometimes over many years, and the Church recognises the importance of both the redress itself and the process of redress in responding to survivors and assisting with their healing. This part of your redress investigation into the Catholic Church is in two parts. As Counsel Assisting said, you will hear from 11 witnesses this week giving evidence about their engagement with several different Catholic entities and those entities' redress processes. A number of the witnesses who are giving evidence are currently involved in those redress processes.

At the hearing in March next year, people with a deep understanding of the Catholic Church's redress process will be giving evidence before you. This includes bishops, congregational



leaders, and leaders of the National Office of Professional Standards. They will explain and answer your questions and those of Counsel Assisting about the current approach of the Church to redress, how it has evolved and developed over time, because it most certainly has done that, and where they believe it is currently in need of improvement.

As you will hear this week and in the evidence in March, there is both co-ordination and independence in the responses of the Catholic Church's authorities. This is a significant difference from the evidence you heard in relation to the Crown. While the National Office of Professional Standards is now in existence and responds to complaints of sexual abuse involving clergy and members of religious congregations, there's no single decision-maker in New Zealand, nobody to determine the behaviour of the Church or response of the Church in totality. This will be plain from the evidence you hear this week when witnesses describe their redress processes in relation to particular institutions, particular congregations, or dioceses. Understanding that combination of independence and co-ordination, and how it has changed, is key, in part, to the response of the Catholic Church.

Question from the **Chair**: It might help us to know, when did the National Office of Professional Standards come into existence, just roughly? How old is it?

It's roughly 20 years old, Ma'am, slightly more but it has evolved quite significantly over time, in terms of the role that it has played. Cardinal John Dew and Phil Hamlin will be giving evidence in March in terms of that evolution. The theme of the evolution, very generally, is increased co-ordination, starting with very little and leading to where we are now, which has centred on that National Office.

And the hearing in March will provide the opportunity for you to explore those issues with the Church. As Counsel Assisting noted in her opening, there is other evidence that will be given this week and the Catholic Church supports the reasons why that evidence needs to be given and requiring survivors to only tell their story once. There are profound accounts of harm to individuals caused by members of the Church that will be given this week, and their hurt and pain is acknowledged.

The bishops and congregational leaders express their profound regret and sorrow that anyone has experienced harm in the care of the Church. It is important that these survivors can share their experiences. They are speaking of their own experiences and in some cases are talking about things that they may have heard from others or understand may have happened. The bishops and congregational leaders consider that this hearing is not the place to question or challenge the experience of survivors or the other matters that they may wish to share with you. Instead, they see their role this week and next week as listening and learning. My clients are committed to improving the redress processes for those who need to engage with them. They will closely listen and learn from the experiences and proposals made this week and in the coming years, both by witnesses, by expert witnesses and then ultimately by you, the Commissioners, in your recommendations.

To demonstrate that commitment to listening and learning, there are representatives from the dioceses, the congregations, and Te Rōpū Tautoko present during the hearing this week and next, save for those instances where the witnesses have asked that they not be present. Other members of the Catholic community, including bishops and congregational leaders, are following this hearing closely through the livestream and the transcript. An offer has been extended, Madam Chair, through the Inquiry's Counsel Assisting to the witnesses if there were particular individuals or entities they wished to be present to hear their evidence, to bear witness to what they have to say, and where survivors have requested particular individuals or representatives from the Catholic Church are present, all efforts have been made to ensure that that is the case. There have been a couple of individuals who have requested people be here and they will be here.



Ma'am, to conclude these opening remarks, I reiterate on behalf of the bishops and congregational leaders their respect for survivors who will be giving evidence this week. They are demonstrating real courage.

The Church is also aware that others will be watching this hearing. The bishops and congregational leaders extend an invitation to all survivors to engage with them or with the National Office of Professional Standards. And likewise, to any survivors of abuse who are listening or watching this and have not yet come forward, the bishops and congregational leaders encourage you to do so in the ways that are appropriate for you. You will be listened to. As I have previously on behalf of my clients, they reiterate that any survivor watching is encouraged please to contact the New Zealand Police about any abuse. My clients are fully committed to transparent co-operation with any criminal investigation and would support and encourage anyone to approach the Inquiry as a place for survivors to share their experiences.

While the bishops and congregational leaders seek to ensure their redress processes are robust, fair, and as respectful as possible, they acknowledge this is an ongoing journey. This redress process has changed much since its inception in approximately 1995 and it will continue to evolve, especially in light of this Inquiry and your recommendations. Therefore, once again, the Catholic Church thanks the survivors who are going to be giving evidence this week and reiterate that they will be heard and their experiences and proposals will be taken on board by the Church. The bishops and congregational leaders will continue to work to improve these redress processes so that all who need to engage with the Church are heard and supported.

Thank you, Madam Chair, Commissioners.