



As a group of ordinary people we express deep concern for the victims, the survivors of religious sexual abuse, those we call "The Innocents." This is a tragedy of immense personal, family and community proportions that affects all of us, particularly the church communities to which we have committed ourselves. While we are in the midst of a public scandal that requires a public apology, it is the healing of these victims, survivors, "The Innocents" that we want to direct our energies towards.

We have formed a group called "For the Innocents." This group initially emerged from a number of us who attended Corpus Christi Werribee in the fifties, sixties and seventies and who communicate regularly. This has now widened to include victims, survivors and their families in our group.

While it is likely that you have given this a lot of thought yourself, the healing that we aim for is one that involves the whole of the communities in which we live. The principal method we wish to adopt is through the personal care and interaction with the abused and their families by both yourselves and your parishioners together. The criminal acts of those who held positions of leadership and trust does not stop with the abused but affects families and whole parish communities.

Sometimes too the institution and it's processes has let the abused down by actions and attitudes that has added to the innocents' trauma. We also hear from the abused and their families that those in the pews can occasionally treat the innocents in appalling ways with isolation, vilification, shame and blame that they dare speak up. One hears of unfortunate statements like "It was your fault" (as a young child?) or that as a family they should "get over it." Is it any wonder then that the innocents and their families withdraw from the so called "Christian" community where one expects to find the Jesus message of love and care in action.

Reaching the innocents can be difficult because they tend to isolate themselves due to the effects of their abuse and grooming. Usually they have an overwhelming sense of internal shame; shattered trust, including that family and "God has deserted me"; an erroneous self blame and feelings of guilt "I must have done something"; a consuming fear of not being believed and therefore disregarded; and distortions in their critical beliefs about their identity and self worth "there must be something wrong with me." Indeed some have not even told their own parents or partners.

Coupled with all this are the debilitating emotions of helplessness, powerlessness, hopelessness, alienation, severe anxiety and above all the absolute sense of isolation they experience. Such feelings, rarely spoken about, can endure well into adulthood. Another form of abuse and grooming deceives the child into believing that "this is a special form of God's love that must be kept secret." Such is the impact on the individual's psyche that it may limit access by an individual to both natural and professional sources for healing. The gospel messages and key commandments call out for us to take action for healing.

The effects of abuse can be profound. It can flow into adult married relationships and affect their children. Their own family of origin has the same range of feelings and unwarranted guilt. It is not something that can be switched off by the wave of a hand. As we know, in some cases the innocents tragically take their own life as the solution to the unending trauma

## **An Apology for The Innocents**

they face. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder expresses itself differently in different people. What applies to those affected by serious bushfires applies here.

Even for yourselves as priest you may find you are affected by the effects of vilification. But often you reel also with the incongruity that you knew these perpetrators as supposedly ordinary "good" guys. Thus like the innocents you too experience the shock and disbelief through a different sort of abuse. This perhaps is the contemporary example of how sin impacts all of us.

The critical element in healing is the unconditional caring acceptance by those in close contact with the abused. Leadership and a team community effort is required with priest and faithful working together, indeed the whole Church if that were possible. The innocents want their pastors to publicly acknowledge their trauma and to apologise for what has happened. Likewise do not forget that those offering their support in turn can need their own. A sense of safety is required as people emerge to tentatively tell their story. But what is clear and what leads us to commit ourselves to this cause is that this supportive personal interaction is the road to healing that both the innocents and ourselves equally desire and yearn for. We have found that a person to person sincere personal apology, spoken with whatever words flow out, is what has the greatest effect.

A suggested way of ongoing involvement:-

- Offer the idea of the Apology to your parish team and all in your parish. Publicly acknowledging the innocents pain and isolation is important. If you want someone to visit please let us know.
- Place the Apology so all those interested can sign up to it.
- Identify a group of those interested in providing support. It could be that some of the innocents or family members will become involved and could deliver unexpected ways to do this work. Trust in you as their Priest is what the innocents desire above all.
- Listen to the innocents as often as is needed, for as long as is needed, for that is the way to healing.
- Get someone to register themselves with our news group so that when a formal public apology is made by our group, your parish will be represented.

From your own parish experience, we believe you will find that the common aims, timing, mutual support, consulting informed sources and networking can make this united parish action robust and self-energising.

Those in Victoria may wish to encourage anyone who has a mind to make a submission to the Parliamentary enquiry on the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organizations where submissions close on 31<sup>st</sup> August.

The other leaflet provided with this is something we have created for the people in your parish. It gives the text of the apology we want to make as part of the healing process. It also suggests how you might wish to involve your community in making the apology and being involved with the innocents and their families.

For anyone who has the fortitude to read it, the searing story of Chrissie & Anthony Foster in their book "Hell on the way to heaven" is but one of such stories that motivated us. Further information about our aims and the group can be obtained as detailed on the other leaflet.

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