

THE ROYAL COMMISSION

BISHOP WILLIAM WRIGHT

IT IS A WEEK since Prime Minister Gillard announced the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse, and some people have seen it as the worst week the Catholic Church in Australia has ever had.

So much of the talk has been about the Church's slow and inadequate response to allegations of abuse over a long period. In all honesty, though, I've been feeling quite positive and relieved ever since the announcement.

Here is the occasion when the nation as a whole can come to grips with one of its greatest issues. It is the beginning of a most important, purifying process.

I am delighted for those victims of abuse who have struggled so hard to get their story told. It may be that there are those for whom the Commission will again bring up things that they would rather not have to relive, and I hope they will be considered and helped through it all.

But for many, this is a chance to have their pain acknowledged and understood by society generally. Stories that were kept hidden for decades, stories that they thought would never be believed, will be accepted as part of a national story of shame and neglect. I hope that for many who suffered abuse this will be a validating and, ultimately, healing time.

Secondly, I think the Royal Commission will be healing for the Church. Yes, there will be a lot of pain involved, a lot of facing up to be done, a lot of exposure of past wrongs.

That's good. It's healthy to have to face up to what you have done, to confess the wrong, to stiffen up your resolve that these things must not happen again. There can be no great change while we hide the truth, and especially when we choose to hide it from ourselves. That's true for individuals, and it's true for institutions.

I am glad, though, that the Royal Com-



Bishop William Wright is the bishop of the diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. He believes that the Royal Commission will be healing for the Church.

mission will not only be considering abuse perpetrated by clergy and Church workers. We all know that the problem of child abuse is spread much more widely than that. If it turns out that the Church has indeed been responsible for a disproportionate amount of abuse, let that be shown and our particular issues addressed. But it is good that the Commission will look further. What I hope is that we will see the need for a whole-of-society response to child abuse.

In this diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, the Church actually has an agency that tries to assist survivors of abuse, and there are survivors' groups and workshops for communities affected. I think this could go much further.

I'd like to think that local government bodies and the boards of licensed clubs, and so on, would begin to think, 'We must have people here who are caught up in this. What can we do for them?'

There need to be more 'spaces' in society generally where abuse victims can go to talk and be accepted, much like there are cancer support groups or local meetings about the problems of youth suicide and the like. It's not enough that survivors of abuse can talk to police, lawyers, the Church and, sometimes, other survivors. They need their story and their ongoing problems recognised and supported by

the community at large. And we need the community at large alert to preventing and exposing abuse.

Great social changes have happened in my lifetime. Racial discrimination, at least in blatant forms, has been abolished, and when it is detected in subtler forms it is roundly condemned. So it is with sexism and, increasingly, with ageism. The awful stigma around unmarried mothers, illegitimacy and divorce have largely gone. The lid was lifted on the 'Stolen

Generations' and on child migrant schemes.

My hope is that after the Royal Commission there will be no more conspiracy of silence around child abuse, no more blaming the victim, no more resigned acceptance that it's going to happen. These would be great outcomes. If the Church has to take a battering along the way, so be it. In the meantime, we in the Church must strive to the uttermost to help the Royal Commission do its job.

(Tuesday, 20 November 2012)

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Lent words are 're' words: re-pent, re-turn, re-cover, re-pair, re-new. All are called to repentance, not just the great sinners, because all are affected when any member is sinful or suffering. The Body of Christ is wounded.

Yet for all the bruised purple, Lent is a season of hope. It ends not with death but with rising from the dead. As the Holy Father reminds us this Lent, our faith means we can look beyond present ills with joyful hope to the fullness of Christ's victory, won by His perfect obedience (Pope Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2013, n. 4).

Against the backdrop of this Lenten paradox—of tears and joy, Cross and Resurrection—the Church in Australia has been rocked by child sexual abuse. As one prominent lay commentator observed: 'Like every community, the Catholic Church is a Church of sinners. Its spiritual rhythms repeat the ancient biblical cycle of failure, repentance, penance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Yet even in a Church that knows a lot about sin, some acts of wickedness still retain their capacity to shock. The sexual abuse of minors by priests – men traditionally called 'Father'—is one such kind of wickedness. So is the failure of bishops—shepherds, in the ancient image—to guard the flock against predators, especially predators from within the household of faith.' (George Weigel, *The Courage to be Catholic*, pp1-2)

—Sowing in Tears, Lenten Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of New South Wales.