

NZ Catholic Church leaders publish statement of commitments to abuse survivors

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Congregational Leaders'
Conference Aotearoa
New Zealand



Te Huinga o ngā Pihopa
Katorika o Aotearoa
New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference

10 January 2023

Statement of Catholic Church Leaders on looking forward from the work of the Royal Commission on Abuse in Care

In February 2018 the Government established the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Abuse in Care for State and Faith-based Institutions. Church leaders had asked to be part of the inquiry, recognising our need to acknowledge our history, and the need to learn lessons for today and the future by examining, understanding, acknowledging, and addressing the abuse that had occurred in the Church and the Church's failures in responding. In October, a milestone was reached when the Commissioners concluded the public hearing phase of their work. Their final report is due in June this year, with one or more interim reports expected before then.

The Catholic Church is grateful for the abuse survivors who have shared their stories with the Royal Commission. Their experiences, and the feedback we have received on our processes from a large number of survivors and some survivor groups, have led to us review and improve our Church processes to support survivors and also to create a safer Church.

The bishops and the leaders of religious orders of the Catholic Church in Aotearoa New Zealand have published a statement of commitments adopted in response to the continuing work of the Royal Commission on Abuse in Care.

The statement is signed by Father Thomas Rouse SSC, President of the Congregational Leaders Conference of Aotearoa New Zealand, and Cardinal John Dew, President of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference, on behalf of their respective members.

The set of 10 commitments – along with others previously made – will become part of what the Church calls the “Tautoko Roadmap” [<https://tautoko.catholic.org.nz/roadmap/%20>] for the path the Church is taking in response to the Royal Commission and the wishes of abuse survivors.

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Te Rōpū Tautoko is the group the Church formed to coordinate Catholic engagement with the Royal Commission, following the Government in 2018 accepting Church requests for abuse in faith-based organisations to be included in the terms of reference [<https://www.catholic.org.nz/news/media-releases/catholic-church-leaders-welcome-inclusion-in-royal-commission/>], which were originally limited to abuse in state care.

The statement says: "It is our expectation and requirement that every person working in the Church, paid or voluntary, will adhere to the policies and procedures that have been established to foster a culture of safeguarding and support of survivors."

The statement is attached here in Word format [[/assets/Catholic-Church-NZ-Leaders-Statement.docx](#)] and here in PDF format [[/assets/Catholic-Church-NZ-Leaders-Statement.pdf](#)].

The Tautoko Roadmap is here [<https://tautoko.catholic.org.nz/roadmap/>].

The full text of the statement is below:

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Statement of Catholic Church Leaders on looking forward from the work of the Royal Commission on Abuse in Care

In February 2018 the Government established the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Abuse in Care for State and Faith-based institutions. Church leaders had asked to be part of the inquiry, recognising our need to acknowledge our history, and the need to learn lessons for today and the future by examining, understanding, acknowledging, and addressing the abuse that had occurred in the Church and the Church's failures in responding. In October, a milestone was reached when the Commissioners concluded the public hearing phase of their work. Their final report is due in June this year, with one or more interim reports expected before then.

The Catholic Church is grateful for the abuse survivors who have shared their stories with the Royal Commission. Their experiences, and the feedback we have received on our processes from a large number of survivors and some survivor groups, have led to us review and improve our Church processes to support survivors and also to create a safer Church.

Much has been done, but we are still learning as we seek to continually improve. However, we cannot just wait while the Government considers how to implement the Royal Commission's recommendations. We have heard and listened to survivors telling us they want us to change now. The current Synod process begun by Pope Francis in 2021 has told us the Catholic community wants us to do much better in responding to survivors and ensuring a safe Church.

We acknowledge that the abuse of people in the care of the Church is real and the failures of Church leaders in responding to reports are real. The impacts of these are present today; for survivors, their whānau, for faith communities, and for society. This is not just an exercise in looking backwards. We look forwards. We will continue to improve safeguarding in all aspects of church life. There is not, and will not be, any tolerance for abuse in the Church.

There are immediate things we as Church leaders can do to achieve this. Pope Francis said in 2018 that everyone in the Church should feel involved in the Church and the societal change that is needed. Some of the change required is quite technical, but at its heart the change involves a change in approach – a different attitude, a new culture. Some things will take longer, especially those that involve others getting on board. This work involves all of us. We commit to a Roadmap of action, knowing that we do not necessarily know where this road will lead.

The following are a number of items we have recently discussed and committed to, in the light of what we have learned from the Royal Commission's hearings. We would like to share these with you, so that you know what we are doing.

COMMITMENTS MADE

The bishops and congregational leaders of the Catholic Church in Aotearoa New Zealand have agreed to:

(a) Support the option of an independent entity for survivors to report abuse and gain redress where they wish to do so.

(b) Support the establishment of an independent entity that reviews and monitors the Church's redress processes for those survivors who take this option. We also support an independent process that reviews and monitors safeguarding systems of our Church institutions.

(c) Expedite or establish internal and external review processes for the current Catholic Church redress and safeguarding systems.

(d) Work towards consistency in redress responses between Catholic Church entities.

(e) Support the proposal for mandatory reporting of reports of abuse in care settings for children, young people, and vulnerable people; acknowledging that significant work needs to be undertaken as to how, when and to whom reports are made. We note that exemptions will need to be made for some settings to protect legal, confessional, and therapeutic privilege.

(f) Request that as part of the special character of schools, school boards notify proprietors of claims of serious disciplinary matters of inappropriate behaviour (whether a student, volunteer, employee, or teacher), through a regular reporting mechanism.

(g) Request that proprietors of schools undertake an audit, with school boards, of buildings, prizes, honorifics, and the like named after bishops, clergy, religious or lay people connected to the Catholic community and photos/portraits on display at the school.

(h) Develop policies to assist schools when naming buildings, prizes or other items after bishops, clergy and/or religious, and displaying photos/portraits and honorifics (such as honour boards).

(i) Continue to audit, with parishes; clubs, other Church organisations, buildings, awards, honorifics and similar named after bishops, clergy, religious or lay people connected to the Catholic community and photos/portraits on display.

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- (j) Request** the National Safeguarding and Professional Standards Committee (NSPSC) to consider, and report back in six months, on:
- (i) how to offer further survivor care and a support-focused approach to reports of abuse.
 - (ii) introducing more consistency and accountability for the outcomes of reports of abuse.
 - (iii) the resource and other implications if the National Office for Professional Standards' (NOPS) jurisdiction were extended beyond sexual abuse by clergy and religious.
 - (iv) establishment of a role for actively monitoring safety plans or other outcomes of any disciplinary actions.
 - (v) audits of disciplinary outcomes and safety plans of living respondents.

These commitments, along with others already made, become part of what is called the Tautoko Roadmap. Te Rōpū Tautoko is the group we formed to coordinate Catholic engagement with the Commission. Members of the group are managing this Roadmap until they hand it on to others later this year, once the Royal Commission's work is completed. We have asked our National Safeguarding and Professional Standards Committee to consider these and other matters and implement them into practice and/or planning. The actions required are not delegated to one group or even some groups. Some actions are for Church leaders, but real lasting change requires everyone within the Church to commit to safeguarding and support of survivors.

Our continued hope is that the work of the Royal Commission will help not only Church leaders but all of us in the community confront the issues of abuse. As a Church, we remain committed to break the cycle of abuse so that all people may participate in churches and communities that are safe and which nourish them to grow to their potential.

It is our expectation and requirement that every person working in the Church, paid or voluntary, will adhere to the policies and procedures that have been established to foster a culture of safeguarding and support of survivors.

The Church takes all reports of abuse seriously. Reports of abuse made about church personnel in New Zealand can be referred to the Church's National Office for Professional Standards. Alternately, people making reports of abuse may choose to go directly to the Police, and the Church will support anyone who requires assistance to do this.

The Royal Commission, media reports, and people disclosing abuse can all be a catalyst for other people to come forward. We encourage anyone who has been abused in the care of the Church to contact us and for your experience to be heard and addressed. We are committed to responding and supporting you, to the extent that you wish to engage with the Church.

Finally, our prayers are that all who have suffered from abuse find peace and hope, and, that all people in our care are safe and free from harm. Please also pray for us, as Church leaders, as we all continue on this road.

Signed

Father Thomas Rouse SSC, President of the Congregational Leaders Conference of Aotearoa New Zealand

Cardinal John Dew, President of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference

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