

PM

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Concerns over Catholic Bishop apology

Bronwyn Herbert reported this story on [Friday, April 29, 2011](#) 18:14:00

MARK COLVIN: Back in Australia and a victims' rights group is accusing the church of covering up another incident. The claim comes after a retired New South Wales bishop, Christopher Toohey, released a carefully worded statement yesterday.

In it he acknowledged that during his early years in the ministry some of his relationships with young adults were not consistent with that required of a good person.

The Bishop resigned two years ago under mysterious circumstances, citing personal health reasons.

Leaders of the Catholic Church's Professional Standards Commission are defending the way that the Church has dealt with Bishop Toohey.

The Church says it is appropriate for a public statement to be made now at a time that the Bishop thought appropriate.

One victim of clerical abuse says the statement is not a full and honest disclosure.

Bronwyn Herbert reports.

BRONWYN HERBERT: Christopher Toohey was ordained into the Catholic Church clergy 30 years ago. Since then he's held some of the most senior positions of the Church, including as Bishop.

He made a surprise retirement two years ago, but late yesterday released a written apology for his behaviour while a church leader:

CHRISTOPHER TOOHEY (voiceover): Since resigning as Bishop of Wilcannia-Forbes in 2009 and living in retirement now, I have had the time to reflect back on my life. My behaviour within the context of my relationships with some young adults in my pastoral care during the early years of my ministry was not consistent with that required of a good person.

I sincerely regret the hurt I have caused to these people and their families. In the light of these reflections I will not be returning to any active ministry in the Church.

BRONWYN HERBERT: His active ministry days are over but Bishop Toohey keeps his title and remains a member of the Church. Father Brian Lucas is the general secretary of the Australian Catholic Bishops conference. He's effectively the Church leader responsible for bishops across Australia.

Father Lucas declined an interview and says he's not willing to answer any questions in regards to Bishop Toohey's statement.

But Michael Salmon, who leads the Catholic Church's Professional Standards Office for New South Wales, was prepared to speak. He says the Church's "Towards Healing" program, which deals with complaints of abuse, is working well.

MICHAEL SALMON: I don't intend to comment in any detail about the Bishop Toohey incident. The complaint was made through Towards Healing; it was dealt with through Towards Healing.

BRONWYN HERBERT: When was the complaint made to Towards Healing?

MICHAEL SALMON: It preceded Bishop Toohey's resignation; I believe that would have been in 2008/09 that the complaint was made.

BRONWYN HERBERT: Is it appropriate for the Church to wait two years after his retirement to reveal this?

MICHAEL SALMON: That was a decision for Bishop Toohey and it was a personal decision that he made that what he felt was the appropriate time in terms of his own personal journey and with respect to the circumstances of the particular complainant.

BRONWYN HERBERT: So how are the public or Catholics supposed to understand what this is about?

MICHAEL SALMON: I think that they would understand that clearly any issue that comes, that underlines a complaint to the Professional Standards Office and where the bishop feels that it is appropriate for him to resign and then to ultimately make a statement like he did. I think the people would understand that that's obviously a matter that is of some significance and serious in its own right but would also understand that it has been dealt with.

BRONWYN HERBERT: There's no clear remark as to what has happened.

MICHAEL SALMON: As I said I don't intend to talk about that and in the interests of the understanding of the people involved and their wishes, and I think there's enough on the public record for people to have an understanding of what this is about.

BRONWYN HERBERT: Has this been referred to the police?

MICHAEL SALMON: No it hasn't. The incident is not of a criminal nature.

BRONWYN HERBERT: The victim support group, Broken Rites is concerned that the wording of Bishop Toohey's statement suggests there was more than one victim. And another victim of clerical sexual abuse, Nicky Davis says the statement leaves her with more questions than answers.

She was abused by a Church leader in the late 1970s and represents the group, Supporters Network of those Abused by Priests.

NICKY DAVIS: Well I don't think they've revealed anything at all. I mean we have no idea what they're actually talking about and so it really sounds like they're putting themselves in a position so that if some revelation comes up in the future they can say, oh yes but we made an admission. Look, here it is. I think they're protecting their backs.

BRONWYN HERBERT: She says there's much more that could be done:

NICKY DAVIS: Some aspect of the situation makes them think that it will look better if they've made this admission but what they're not trying to do, they're not trying to help victims, they're not trying to be open and honest about what's been going on. They're not trying to examine this situation; look at how this could happen and how they can prevent it from happening again in the future. They're not doing any of that.

BRONWYN HERBERT: George Pell, the Archbishop of Sydney, declined to speak to PM. He referred questions to the Australian Bishops Conference, who had already refused to be interviewed.

MARK COLVIN: Bronwyn Herbert.

