

A Statement by the Congregation of Christian Brothers of W.A. (July 1993)¹

INTRODUCTION:

In recent years, controversy has arisen over the treatment of children resident in the W.A. child-care institutions at Clontarf, Castledare, Tardun and Bindoon, especially during the 1940s and 1950s.

Some former students have made serious allegations of ill-treatment and abuse.

Other students of the same era claim such allegations are grossly exaggerated and are not representative of life in these institutions.

The following statement from the Congregation of Christian Brothers in W.A. seeks to put the events and circumstances of that time into proper context so that fair judgement can be made and to establish a basis for reconciliation with those who have been aggrieved.

OUR FINDINGS:

We have studied the allegations available to us, and we have made our own independent inquiries. The evidence is such as to convince us that abuses did take place, abuses that in some cases went well beyond the tough conditions and treatment that were part of life in such institutions in those days.

While the extent of the abuse appears to have been exaggerated in some quarters, the fact that such physical and sexual abuse took place at all in some of our institutions cannot be excused and is for us a source of deep shame and regret. Such abuse violates the child's dignity and sense of self-worth. It causes psychological and social trauma that can lead to lasting wounds of guilt, shame, insecurity and problems in relationships.

OUR APOLOGY:

We, the Christian Brothers of today, therefore unreservedly apologise to those individuals who were victims of abuse in these institutions.

We do not condone in any way the behaviour of individual Brothers who may have perpetrated such abuse.

In apologising, however, we entreat people not to reflect adversely on the majority of Brothers and their co-workers of the era who went about their work with integrity and deep regard for the children entrusted to their care.

Their work and dedication are reflected in the numerous students who, despite deprived backgrounds, went on to take their places as successful members of Australian society. We are deeply grateful for the very many expressions of thanks and support we have had from former students.

THE CONTEXT:

Between 1901 and 1983 some 4,000 boys, mostly orphans, child migrants and State wards, were cared for in Christian Brother institutions in W.A.

Most of the children who came to these institutions were from deprived backgrounds. Many were child migrants from the U.K. and Ireland, brought to Australia in a scheme initiated by the Commonwealth Government and with which several voluntary organisations, including the Australian Catholic Church, actively co-operated.

Conditions were tough, unnecessarily so by today's standards, but quite common in child-care institutions in those days. Resources were scarce, Government assistance was minimal, personnel were untrained in child-care and were often overworked, and specialist help was almost unknown.

For some boys their time in these centres provided them with the care, education and training which gave them their opportunity to make their way in life; for others it was an unhappy and hurtful experience.

¹ Text from Senate Community Affairs References Committee Secretariat, Parliament of Australia, Lost Innocents: righting the record - report on child migration, Commonwealth of Australia, 30 August 2001, Appendix 7.
http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate_Committees?url=clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/1999-02/child_migrat/report/e07.htm

We acknowledge the shortcomings in the child-care practices of those days and deeply regret the hurt that some children suffered, and whatever long-term suffering that may be attributable to their experience in these institutions.

We reject, however, the implication sometimes made that the later suffering or difficulties of some former residents can be blamed entirely on the time spent in our institutions.

Many factors can adversely affect the way people's lives turn out, and the boys concerned suffered more than their fair share before and after their time in our institutions, e.g.

Experiencing little or nothing of ordinary family life and spending formative years in child-care institutions;

Experiencing the turmoil and deprivation of war and its aftermath in Britain and Europe; and

Meeting later hardships and disappointments as young adults trying to find their place in society.

Is it any wonder that such circumstances affected many of them for the rest of their lives?

Indeed, the courage and resourcefulness shown by many of them in the face of childhood deprivation must command our respect and admiration.

We cannot and do not excuse any abuse that took place in our institutions nor do we wish to minimise in any way the damage caused.

However, for those looking to apportion blame for such incidents the following must be borne in mind:

The events took place mostly 30 to 50 years ago and many of the people named as accused, victims or witnesses, are dead or unable to be contacted. While the passage of time does not diminish the seriousness of the incidents, it does make it extremely difficult to uncover the full truth; and

Regular inspections were made of these institutions by the Government agencies who had ultimate responsibility for the welfare of the children. There is no indication of generalised abuse in their reports.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE:

We cannot change the past. We cannot take away the hurt. We can express our heartfelt regret for the failings of the past and we can, on behalf of our predecessors, beg the forgiveness of those who suffered.

Also, we can offer practical assistance to those who need it. To this end we are considering practical ways of offering assistance of offering assistance to those who are now suffering. To those who were adversely affected, we give our sincere commitment that we will do all that reasonably can be done to ease your pain by helping you with your present day needs.

We hope that a spirit of cooperation and reconciliation will mark our efforts to find mutually acceptable solutions to present problems.

We continue to welcome approaches from former residents of our child-care institutions who wish to share with us their concerns. Some may wish to speak to Br Pat O'Doherty on (09) 458 9693 (after hours); others may wish to contact one of the Brothers at our Province office on (09) 450 5311; others may prefer to contact Sister Tanya at Catholic Migration on (09) 221 1727.

Br Gerald Faulkner

On behalf of the Congregation of Christian Brothers

Perth W.A.