



JOINT MEDIA STATEMENT

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Australian Catholic leaders back ‘pontifical secret’ clarification

The presidents of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia have welcomed Pope Francis’ decision to remove the application of the pontifical secret in all cases of child sexual abuse, noting that its existence hasn’t stopped Catholic leaders from reporting abuse to civil authorities in Australia.

The pontifical secret has been criticised as impeding appropriate investigation of priests and other Church ministers and personnel. Pope Francis’ decision is seen as a step that will help Church and civil authorities work more closely in dealing with allegations, will support compliance with civil law and will ensure greater transparency.

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference president Archbishop Mark Coleridge said when the topic of pontifical secret was raised during the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, a number of experts pointed out that Catholic leaders had long understood the importance of reporting allegations to the appropriate authorities.

“As we – along with leaders of religious institutes – said in our response to the Royal Commission, the accusation that Australian bishops or religious superiors were hiding behind the pontifical secret to protect abusers was untrue,” he said.

“To cite that response: ‘The pontifical secret does not in any way inhibit a bishop or religious leader from reporting instances of child sexual abuse to civil authorities.’”

Catholic Religious Australia president Br Peter Carroll FMS said it was important to understand that this decision by the Holy Father does not change reporting obligations, but works to make clear that pontifical secrecy in no way hinders reporting to authorities.

“Pope Francis’ actions announced overnight clarify the matter for the Church around the world and confirms the Church’s support of transparency, to which the Church in Australia is fully committed,” Br Peter explained.

Archbishop Coleridge said: “The National Catholic Safeguarding Standards, adopted earlier this year, reiterate and emphasise that approach, saying that Church entities must have policies that see concerns reported to relevant authorities – whether state law requires it or not – and cooperation with police,” he said.