

JUST BECAUSE



Advocate M explains how world a be

Different rules applied to treatment of Bishop Bill

WHEN Bishop William Morris was forced by Rome to retire early in May of this year I thought there would be a fair response from parishioners, community members, the media and even from quarters overseas. As a way of keeping abreast of this I set up a little Google-alert mechanism on my computer to monitor news items and commentary on the treatment of Bishop Morris. This meant that any news item mentioning Bishop Morris would pop up in my email inbox.

Of course there was a wide range of reactions. Many expressed shock, outrage, hurt, grief and a small number satisfaction. One of these items particularly caught my eye - and I quote part of it below.

"But it's also important to recognise that in the Church we also see the bishop as the father of the family of the Church. Fathers can make mistakes and not be removed from their families, and the way to respond is not like hiring and firing in a business." (National Catholic Register, June 21, 2011)

The first thing that is remarkable about this quote is the author - an archbishop no less. The second thing is which archbishop - Charles Chaput, archbishop of Denver, in the United States. He was the man sent by the Vatican to investigate Bishop Morris and the entire Toowoomba Diocese. Bishop Bill is still waiting to receive his final report.

Of course context is everything. Archbishop Chaput is not speaking of our Bishop Bill at all - he is speaking about bishops who get caught up in the mire that is sexual abuse scandals such as have occurred in the United States and other countries across the world. The message might mean one thing to a reader in Denver - but it is completely different here in Toowoomba. It seems that you must be cautious and forgiving with bishops on matters of sexual abuse but in the case of Bishop Morris, who has done no wrong on this or any other front, the rules were very, very different.

The US bishops recently released a report arguing that abuse of

children by clergy was a result of the permissiveness of the 1960s! David O'Brien, a historian of American Catholicism at the University of Dayton, criticised the report, stating it was dangerous because it seemed to exonerate bishops. It is no accident that the recent poll conducted by the Chronicle found the person most trusted in our community is Bishop Morris. Instead of ducking for cover or looking for legal loopholes he took responsibility for harm caused and gave his first priority to the victims and their families. You don't often hear Bravehearts founder Hetty Johnston praising Church leaders in the area of handling sexual abuse of children. In fact the only occasion I have ever observed this was last July, regarding Bishop Morris' handling of a case in a local school.

"What's happened in Toowoomba, as I understand it, is a first," said Ms Johnston. "This is a no-contest approach and the church is not trying to defend itself against the appalling behaviour of those ... who allegedly tried to cover this up

or minimise it or make it go away. We're hoping that it signals a new way forward for churches across the board, particularly the Catholic Church."

Since May 1, when a man of integrity was forced to retire, thousands of people have written, emailed and phoned messages of support for Bishop Bill. Secrecy and a lack of transparency allow all forms of abuse to flourish within any institution. The one thing that seemed to get Bishop Bill offside with the powers that be was his efforts to give people a voice. That voice cannot be taken away. This coming Sunday people from the far west will gather to thank Bishop Bill for his leadership in Cunnamulla. The community of Roma and surrounds will do the same next Wednesday and then on August 28 people of all faiths and good will are welcome to join in a celebration at the University of Southern Queensland. Another way in which your voice can be heard is via the Australian Bishops Conference. To find out more go to bishopbillstory.com.au