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Archbishop Hart's Review of the Melbourne Response a Delaying Tactic.

The Catholic Church and other religious institutions have come under sustained pressure to revisit their settlement processes and to re-open claims that have already been settled. In this context the Christian Brothers have already invited people who have settled their claims to come forward and seek further compensation.

It was widely expected that the Melbourne Archdiocese would make a similar announcement with Chrissie and Anthony Foster lobbying hard for this to occur. Unfortunately rather than announce that claims will be re-opened, Archbishop Dennis Hart has announced a review of the compensation payment process of the Melbourne Response.

The Melbourne Response was established in 1996 by then Archbishop George Pell to compensate victims of sexual abuse within the Melbourne Archdioceses of the Catholic Church in response to what seemed to be a wave of sexual assault allegations. Many would say that it was actually an avalanche the effects of which are still being seen today.

The Melbourne Response operated very effectively for a long time in terms of containing the cost of sexual abuse claims with the maximum payable being initially \$50,000 which later increased to the current maximum of \$75,000. Some would also say that the Melbourne Response operated to protect the Catholic Church brand and to ensure that the fallout from sexual abuse allegations was also contained.

The Royal Commission has shown however that the maximum payments under the Melbourne Response are derisory when compared with what some claimants have been able to extract from the Catholic Church where the allegations were sufficiently embarrassing. The Royal Commission has also put the Church under enormous pressure to be seen to be doing the right thing, even though the Royal Commission has not completed its investigations and is yet to hand down its recommendations.

Archbishop Hart has appointed a retired Federal Court Judge Donnell Ryan QC to undertake the review of the Melbourne Response. The Terms of Reference are as follows:

whether the current cap of \$75,000 should be increased or whether that cap should be removed
If the cap is to be retained, the amount of the cap, having regard to the amounts available under existing or proposed redress schemes
how the amount of compensation to be paid to victims should be determined
Whether past cases where compensation has been paid should be reviewed and the procedures that should apply to such a review
any changes to the structure, practises, policies, protocols and procedures of the Melbourne Response arising from any increase in the cap or its removal.

The announcement of the review is disappointing. The Catholic Church should know by now what needs to be done. A review is just delaying the inevitable and a way of diluting responsibility for any changes that are ultimately made.

The Catholic Church also knows that for many victims there is no more time. Evidence before the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the abuse of children by non-Government and Religious Institutions and the Royal Commission into Child Sex Abuse of suicide and severe mental health issues caused by clerical abuse is mounting and further delay can only exacerbate these problems.

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