

7-22-08 - Pope's secret Mass inflames row over abuse

Joel Gibson, Paola Totaro and Annabel Stafford, Sydney Morning Herald (AU)

THE Catholic Church has defended its handling of a secret Mass involving the Pope and four victims of sexual abuse early yesterday amid criticism that the sunrise meeting excluded hundreds of abuse survivors, their families and support groups.

At 7am, hours before he flew out of Sydney, the Pope conducted a private Mass in a chapel attached to St Mary's Cathedral.

But a Melbourne man, Anthony Foster, whose two daughters were repeatedly raped by a Catholic priest at primary school, and who had returned from Europe to seek a meeting with the Pope, said he was disgusted that he and other vocal victims had been sidelined from the meeting.

"I'm happy for the people who did meet him, if it helped them. But I think [the church] has lost an opportunity to speak to people like us and Broken Rites [a support group] who truly represent the needs of all victims," he said.

Mike Fabbro, of the Child Sex Abuse Survivors' Collective, said the meeting was "secretive and typical of the church's manipulative approach".

Chris MacIsaac of Broken Rites said it was cowardly to hand-pick people who were happy with the church's response to victims. "If they want to fix this, they must listen to the people who have grievance with it."

But the Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, said the four victims had asked to remain anonymous. He would say only that they were two men and two women, aged "30 and a little bit older", and "some of them were from Sydney. Whether they all still live in Sydney is another question."

The church's NSW director of professional standards, Michael Salmon, said he had chosen them after a request "a number of weeks ago" because they had been through the church's internal processes, had achieved a level of healing, and would be comfortable attending Mass.

None had pursued civil legal actions but one had pursued criminal charges. All were abused as minors - one by a lay person in a school context and the rest by priests.

Cardinal Pell would not say whether they had offered constructive criticism of the church's response to abuse in what he said were private conversations with the Pope.

Asked why the church had not selected victims who would be prepared to share the encounter with others, Cardinal Pell said other victims and their families could share in his description of the event.

"It was a small gathering which we hope will send out a message of the genuine sorrow of the Pope and of the Australian bishops. Many, many hundreds of people have contacted me wanting to meet the Pope. I wasn't able to accommodate all of them.

"I was moved by the encounter. I think it will have a positive effect with the people who were there."

But last night two of the victims released an anonymous statement because it was important, they said, for those they were representing to know about the meeting.

"During the meeting with the Pope it was clear he was well aware of our experiences. He listened closely and was moved. He was compassionate in his words of consolation to us. He recognised and said that the abuse must be stopped at the seminary training stage. He repeated this again, directing the comment to the handful of clergy who were standing some distance away," the statement said.

"We were moved by the Pope's compassionate response to us and his comment that he would continue to pray for all victims of sexual abuse. He said he hoped the meeting would help us and others to move forward with our lives.

"We still suffer from the effects of the abuse to which we were subjected. It is for that reason that we ask for the understanding of other victims of sexual abuse for our need to maintain privacy in assisting us to move forward."

The Pope's spokesman said the meeting unfolded in a climate of respect and "intense emotions" and was held after the World Youth Day celebrations to ensure it did not overshadow the pilgrimage.