



# Guidance note: Managing Monuments and Memorials

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AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SAFEGUARDING LTD

*A safe Church for everyone*

Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd acknowledges the lifelong trauma of abuse victims, survivors and their families, the failure of the Catholic Church to protect, believe and respond justly to children and adults at risk, and the consequent breaches of community trust.

Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd is committed to fostering a culture of safety and care for children and adults at risk.



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## Introduction

ACSL provides this guidance and advice to Catholic entities, where buildings, monuments, plaques and other memorials named in honour of a significant contributor to an entity, is found to have been a perpetrator of abuse of children or vulnerable adults, or someone in authority who has been found to have failed to act on that abuse. It outlines best practice processes for organisations to work with their communities to determine the best action. Such actions can include preserving, removing, reclaiming, or recontextualising the heritage.

When we choose to preserve morally complex heritage, such as monuments, plaques and memorabilia, we inherit a particular responsibility to ensure that doing so does not have an apologist effect. It is easy for preservation to result in downplaying the seriousness of the injustice. It can also have the effect of reinforcing both overt and subtle prejudicial attitudes. Preserving works best when it includes both formal and informal education that incorporate these objects as points for reflection and learning.

How such monuments and memorials are treated forms an integral part of what is known as transitional justice. Common components of transitional justice in practice include the following: prosecution initiatives; truth seeking to map and document serious violations; material reparations via compensation, development aid or social investment; symbolic reparations such as museums, memorials and commemorations; institutional reform to prevent future abuses; and measures to encourage public engagement in the process of transition towards justice and reconciliation.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse made recommendations that support a transitional justice response to the horrendous revelations of sexual and physical abuse experienced by children in institutional care. As well as legislative reform, the Redress Scheme, opening the statute of limitations for civil action on abuse claims, this response includes the establishment of a national memorial for victims and survivors of institutional child sexual abuse to be built in Canberra. This memorial is intended to provide people with lived experience, their families, supporters, and allies, a place of remembrance, reflection, truth, healing and hope.

For some Catholic entities, there may be a need to remove memorials previously dedicated to individuals who are now known to have been instrumental in covering up abuse, or involved in abuse of children or vulnerable adults. In considering the case for removal of a memorial, or monument, it is important to acknowledge that these can, and should be historic moments in a community, marking a



turning point in how the community addresses its history. Any discussion of removal attracts intense scrutiny, which can provide an opportunity to improve public understanding of the history and its relevance today and to affirm collective commitments to human rights and equality.

However, any institution considering removal should be aware that it will frequently be seen as an attempt to escape an uncomfortable history, rather than to confront it. This strategy, therefore, depends on outstanding leadership and public communication.

## Transitional Justice Issues

*The central question of transitional justice is “How should a society come to terms with a violent past?”. For us in the Catholic Church the question is “How can the Catholic Church come to terms with an abusive and violent past that has been revealed to have created intergenerational trauma and irreparable damage to the children and vulnerable people entrusted to our care?”.*

The United Nations defines transitional justice as ‘the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation’.

In its guidance on transitional justice, the United Nations enjoins communities to seek peace, reconciliation, and justice as mutually supporting aims, and it enshrines four key rights to

- justice,
- truth,
- symbolic and material reparations, and

- guarantees of nonrecurrence.

*The right to Justice* – exists not just in civil law, and in Canon Law. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Catholic Social Teachings promote and preserve the rights of children to live safely, to be loved and cared for. Efforts by law enforcement agencies to gather evidence and prosecute child abusers has been escalated, with prosecutions of Catholic perpetrators continuing to emerge. Vos Estis Lux Mundi (VELM) and the National Response Protocol and National Response Framework, support the civil society standards in responding to abuse.

*The right to Truth* - the work of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council documented and mapped Catholic responses over time to abuse claims. This information was examined by the Royal Commission which encouraged truth telling and invited private evidence from victims, survivors and their advocates. This was profoundly helpful to many victims who felt able to tell their story to a 'higher authority' and to be heard for the first time. The threshold of proof and evidence developed for the Redress Scheme supports a trauma-informed approach to supporting victims and survivors.

*The right to Symbolic and Material Reparations* - The Redress and civil litigation report of the Royal Commission recommended that appropriate redress for survivors should include a 'direct personal response'. The report states that a direct personal response should include 'an opportunity to meet with a senior representative of the institution'. It also should include an opportunity for the survivor to ask the institution to take appropriate steps in relation to withdrawing honours or dedications. It is essential that survivors of child sexual abuse have input into any memorial design and process. Survivors have differing views about the form a memorial might take. Suggestions included: plaques, monuments, and memorials at institutions or in towns, symbols such as a statue of a child, the conversion of institutional sites into museums, memorials, precincts, drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres and community centres, memorial gardens or playgrounds, services such as a well-funded survivor centre and place of healing and a national day for victims and survivors.

Material reparations by religious organisations also include the removal of memorials and monuments to known perpetrators of abuse, renaming facilities etc.

*The right of guarantee that there will be no future reoccurrence* - the National Response Protocol and the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards, endorsed by the Catholic Church in Australia, provide the framework through which we are all working together to achieve this goal. There is an explicit zero tolerance to abuse.

Mandatory training in safeguarding for everyone within the Church, risk management protocols, leadership, engagement with victims and survivors, hearing the voices and concerns of children, codes of conduct, professional supervision and reflective practice, are in place to ensure a vision that the Church is a safe place for everyone.

## **Issues for the religious organisation to consider when discerning how to deal with monuments and memorials**

Best practice in transitional justice seeks to guarantee that the design, process and outcome of transitional justice mechanisms and processes involve consistent consultation and collaboration with victim-survivors and their families. As Simon Robins suggests “an awareness of the centrality of victims/survivors and their needs to the whole process drives it.”

Removing a monument or renaming a building is a historical moment, which can make a lasting impression in public memory and become part of both written and oral records of events. In their best enactments, removals can mark a moment when a community made a decisive stance to acknowledge past wrongdoing, distance itself from the rationales that justified that wrongdoing, and reaffirm shared commitment to universal human rights and equality.

These moments and the debates building up to them are potentially powerful learning opportunities. They attract intense public attention and thus open a window in which it is possible to re-educate a public about the historical record and also set a direction for future values.

Removal can also be read as evidence that institutions are attempting to ‘erase history’ and hide evidence of past wrongdoing, instead of addressing it forthrightly. It may also appear to scapegoat

individuals for collective wrongdoing or hold figures to unreasonable standards given the social milieu in which they lived.

It is important then that publicly expressive actions are carried out with an awareness of possible misinterpretation, since the social meaning of an action depends not just on intended meaning but on reception. For those with lived experience of sexual abuse, their tolerance for complex and ambiguous messages, and abilities to integrate complex messages may confuse or alienate them further. The guidance provided to faith organisations by the NSW Office of the Children’s Guardian, gives insights into the ways in which people with lived experience of sexual abuse draw on different life views and cultural contexts, to navigate their trauma-filled lives.

If an institution does not communicate fully, clearly, and attractively about their actions, a public can easily get the impression that they are acting on extreme principles, are whitewashing history, or are even attempting to evade attention. This means that removals may hinder goals of reconciliation if not supported by outstanding public communication.

## What to do with statues, portraits, images and plaques?

The institution must consider the impact of such memorials on victims and survivors. In the case of a statue or large portrait, a viewer will see the statue or portrait first, and amongst its abiding impressions will be its scale and posture, often a stance of pride and authority. Once that authority, pride or trust has been eroded by the involvement of the individual in sexual abuse or cover up, then removing the image from a place of prominence has the impact of removing that person’s authority and perceived influence.

If a statue or memorial structure cannot be removed, ACSL recommends a process of ‘reclaiming’ the structure. Reclaiming need not keep original objects in place. Instead, it can be combined with preserving, removing, or recontextualizing initiatives.

The value of ‘reclaiming’ is as part of responding to contested heritage. Reclaiming refers to any strategy that adopts a previously pejorative symbol and re-signifies it to create a new symbol of pride and affirmation, in a way that empowers a previously disempowered group.

Reclaiming involves symbolic reconfigurations. It takes metaphors, meanings, and associations that previously seemed rigid, fixed, and negative and recombines them to generate new meanings. One example could be to repurpose a structure or building as a centre of healing and reparation. Another could be the symbolic covering of a portrait which remains in place but is no longer acknowledged. For a plaque which has no historical significance but which names a known perpetrator, ACSL recommends that it be removed, and the decision clearly communicated.

A plaque is inevitably much smaller than a statue or a portrait. Only a small number of viewers will read a plaque, and a plaque will not communicate as directly, deeply, or subliminally as a strong human form. As well, historical plaques have markedly different implications depending on wording and content.

There is risk in placing a minimal plaque of acknowledgement or reparation, so the size becomes an important part of the design. Too small and it may be interpreted as not truly aimed at symbolic repair but is instead designed to protect statues from removal and diffuse criticism. Too large and there is a risk that a recontextualized statue or image could still assert the power of the figure presented.

Reclaiming supports the victim-survivor’s rights to justice because it can be a way for them to assert status and hold institutions accountable for the abuse they endured. Reclaiming can ‘flip the narrative’, directing attention towards agency and stories of persons previously marginalized. Reclaiming also supports the right to truth and acknowledgement.

However, reclaiming is not sufficient for transitional justice in the aftermath of sexual abuse. The most successful reclaiming actions are those enacted by those with the lived experience of abuse who have been previously excluded or ignored. However, it is not enough for such groups to affirm their own standing. It is also necessary for the wider community to also affirm this standing and demonstrate a commitment to justice, truth, repair, and equal protection.

Our Catholic Institutions and wider society must express and follow through on these commitments in response to the Royal Commission recommendations. However, all our wider social efforts at repair can't be seen to dominate the victim-survivor community's own ability to shape responses. Hence the importance of victim-survivor groups to be closely consulted to shape actions related to the treatment of memorials and monuments.

## Honour boards and rolls

The use of honour boards and rolls is widespread in many institutions. They may feature the names of individuals who have later been associated with abuse, or in knowingly covering up abuse. The decision to erase these names from honour Rolls or Boards should be done in close consultation with the community, for the reasons outlined above, and the public interpretation of those actions, or where historic records are important. Other options may include adding a symbol to their name to represent a 'dishonour'.

## Naming buildings

ACSL advises caution in naming new buildings and facilities after living person and instead draw on saints or other venerable religious figures, historic figures, deceased local community leaders, geographic features, biblical references, and place names.

## Conclusion

The Church across the globe is grappling with the consequences of truth-telling about abuse scandals that have permeated institutions over decades. The denials, obfuscation and cover ups that were part of the Church's responses should now be replaced by a commitment to the principles of transitional justice. The revisions to Canon Law: Chapter 6 provide clearer guidance about how Church Authorities are to manage abuse claims. This is the public position of the Catholic Church leadership in Australia, as articulated in the response of the Catholic Bishops and Catholic Religious Australia to the Royal Commission.

The questions to be considered include whether these principles of transitional justice imply that we should take down pictures and rename places called after people who participated in serious rights abuses? Or do they imply that we should keep such elements of contested heritage in place, as part of truth telling and acknowledgement, and as tools for vividly teaching the history in question, to support the aims of nonrecurrence?

Many successful responses involve some form of symbolic reconfigurations or reclaiming, very broadly conceived, so that locations of current or former celebratory iconography become reparative sites of memory, such as the McKillop Heritage and Information Service. The best forms of reclaiming can build pride, identity, agency, and commitment to repairing injustices.

ACSL recommends that the design, process and outcome of transitional justice mechanisms and processes must always involve consultation and collaboration with victim-survivors and their families.

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