

The Diocese, Fr Wilf Baldwin and the High Court Judgment

A Statement from Bishop Crispian Hollis

You will have seen in the press this week coverage of a High Court case involving the Diocese. I only received the judgment on Tuesday but I wanted to write to you ahead of the weekend so that you are able to answer any questions you might be asked.

The Claimant in this case, known as JGE and who is now 47 years old, alleges that she was sexually abused by a priest of the Diocese, Fr Wilf Baldwin, whilst she was resident at a children's home in the Diocese. The primary reason that we are defending this claim is that, at the time the Claimant was resident at the home, Fr Baldwin was based at the other end of the Diocese and had no connection with the children's home. The Diocese does not therefore accept the Claimant's allegations against Fr Baldwin. The Court will have to reach its own conclusion if and when the main issue is heard, which is unlikely to be before next year.

The Claimant has the benefit of a court order whereby she cannot be identified; unfortunately, the same consideration has not been extended to Fr Baldwin, who was a priest of unblemished character until these allegations were made shortly before his death and who had no opportunity to respond to the allegations made against him.

In March of this year, the High Court itself ordered that the question of the Bishop's liability for the actions of his priests be tried as a preliminary issue in this case. I would like to make it clear that the Diocese was not seeking to evade responsibility for the actions of its priests. The Diocese accepts that where a Bishop has, for example, failed to prevent a priest from committing an act of wrongdoing, he will be liable in negligence. However, this case was not concerned with negligence, it was concerned with whether a Bishop should be automatically liable for the actions of a priest simply by virtue of the fact that he or one of his predecessors appointed the priest. The Diocese is aware of no other organisation which can be held liable for the actions of its office holders in this way.

There are clear problems with the judgment of the High Court in this case. The Diocese has not yet made a decision as to whether or not to appeal that judgment. A decision will be taken following receipt of legal advice and bearing in mind the sensitivities of these issues for those who have suffered abuse perpetrated by a Catholic priest.

I would like to emphasise that the Diocese takes allegations of sexual abuse extremely seriously and is committed to creating a safe environment for all. By adopting the Catholic Church's national safeguarding policies and procedures, and through its own Safeguarding Commission, the Diocese of Portsmouth works hard to ensure the welfare of children and vulnerable individuals within the Diocese.

The costs associated with this case, together with any damages that might be awarded if we were to lose the case, are being covered by our insurers and neither parish funds nor Living Our Faith funds are at risk.

Bishop Crispian Hollis
Bishop of Portsmouth

10th November 2011