

Canadian archbishop, who set up sex abuse inquiry, has died

The Canadian archbishop who three decades ago stood at ground zero of the global child sexual abuse scandals has died.

Archbishop Alphonsus L. Penney was 93.

He was Archbishop of St. John's in Newfoundland for 12 years, beginning in 1979. During his tenure, there were revelations of child sexual abuse by the Christian Brothers at the Mount Cashel Orphanage in 1984 and 1985, then a series of revelations of abuse by priests who had served in multiple St. John's parishes.

In 1989, Archbishop Penney called into existence the Archdiocesan Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy and persuaded former lieutenant-governor of Newfoundland and Labrador Gordon Winter, an Anglican layman, to head the five-person commission.

A month after the commission delivered its report in July of 1990, Penney tendered his resignation to Pope John Paul II and left office in February of 1991. At the time of his resignation, five St. John's priests and former priests had been convicted and more had trials pending.

"I recognize the deficiencies in my handling of this matter. My leadership and administration have not been perfect," Archbishop Penney told the press. "We are a sinful Church. The wounds of the Church have been laid bare. We are naked. Our anger, our pain, our anguish, our shame are clear to the whole world."

The commission never called for his resignation, but it was the right thing for the archbishop to do, former commissioner Sr. Nuala Kenny told *The Catholic Register*.

"We never called for it, but he did exactly what I think was required of him by the Gospel," Kenny recalled.

Kenny had worked at arm's-length from Archbishop Penney and the archdiocesan administration, helping to produce the 39-page Winter Commission report. A few years ago Kenny and current Archbishop Martin Currie met with the former archbishop in a nursing home to speak with him of the "enormous contribution" he had made in calling the commission of enquiry.

"We had a cup of coffee with a very frail soul," Kenny remembered. "He understood exactly what I said, but he actually had tears in his eyes as I told him that while I knew that all of that was terribly painful, now in the history

and in the literature his commission is recognized as something that was really quite an extraordinary act of repentance.”

The commission made 55 recommendations, the first being that “the archdiocesan Church formally acknowledge its share of guilt and responsibility, and that the archdiocesan administration apologize in such a way as to remove any suggestion that the victims were to blame.”

“These boys, now young men, are victims,” Archbishop Penney told the national press corps that had descended on St. John’s.

“They are blameless. To you, we say that we are deeply sorry that this sexual abuse happened. We are sorry that our culture and the expression of Church and priesthood were such that you felt alone and powerless. We are sorry for the times you were not believed, were not supported or were ostracized in any way in our archdiocesan community. For every word and action which may have deepened your pain, we are profoundly sorry.”

The Winter Report became one of the major building blocks for the 1992 statement and policy from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops called “From Pain To Hope” – the first sexual abuse guidelines ever issued by a national bishops’ conference.

Archbishop Penney was born in St. John’s in 1924 and ordained for the archdiocese in 1949. His life as a bishop began in the Diocese of Grand Falls in 1972 and he became archbishop of his home town in 1979.

The funeral Mass for Archbishop Penney was held Dec. 15 at the Cathedral Basilica of St. John the Baptist in St. John’s, followed by interment at the Belvedere Cemetery.