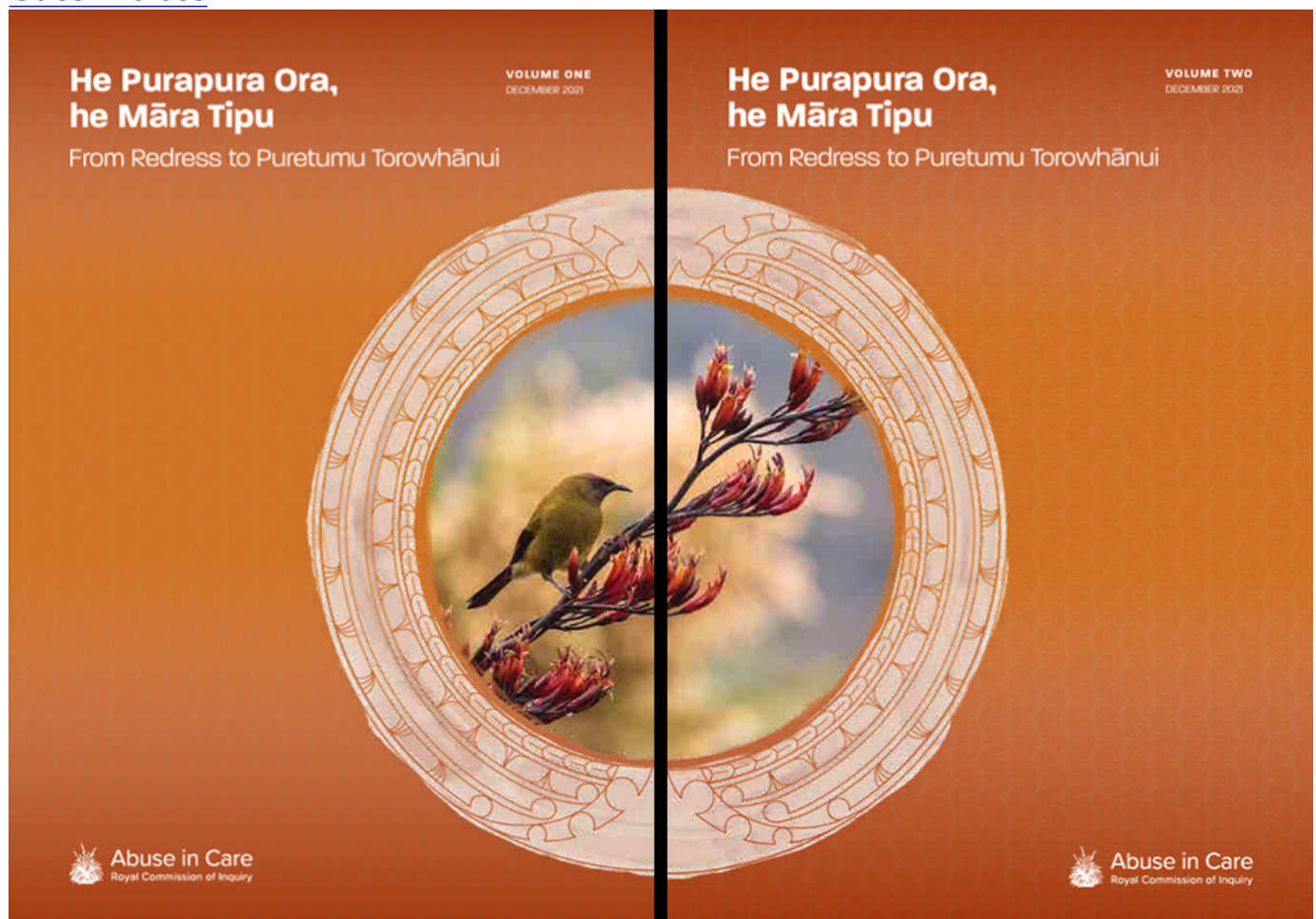


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Pictured are two volumes of New Zealand's 2021 interim redress report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, "He Purapura Ora, he Māra Tipu; from Redress to Puretumu." The commission released the final report in 2024. (NCR/abuseincare.org.nz)



by Christopher Longhurst

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Earlier this year, New Zealand's Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care [found that](#) "Catholic Church leaders have not been accountable or transparent to their congregations and the broader community about the nature and extent of abuse and neglect by their members." The commission [also reported](#) how such a lack of accountability has impacted the church leaders' ability to provide an adequate response.

But now that inadequacy has reached another level as church leaders revictimize the abused and offend the entire faithful through a recently mandated "[Litany of Lament](#)." All Massgoers were told to beg for mercy for the "crimes and sins of sexual, physical, emotional and spiritual abuse perpetrated by clergy," and for "the failure of pastors and shepherds who did not respond to the cries of the abused."

For innocent churchgoers (along with clerical and religious abuse survivors and family members of victims) to recite "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned" in relation to the sins and crimes of priests and bishops means they take the guilt and responsibility of those sins and crimes onto themselves. This amounts to another form of abuse, and for the survivors and their family members, it is revictimization.

The bishops have now created a pretext in which if you recite this litany, you receive God's mercy on yourself for the crimes and sins of clergy against children, young people and vulnerable adults.

However, the people are not responsible for those crimes. Attempts by church leaders to shift responsibility only increases the problem of clerical and religious sexual abuse.

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Using a Litany of Lament during Mass to transfer blame from the guilty parties onto innocent people is an exploitation of faith and trust. Transferring blame is another

form of escaping accountability.

In the [Catholic tradition](#), a legitimate [lament](#) is a public expression of sorrow, a prayer of repentance in times of suffering, a request for God's deliverance. It must be correctly expressed and properly enacted. When the sins are one's own then it is not unlike confession though in a more open and dramatic way. When arranged by others, it must not take place without those involved being fully prepared beforehand.

Further, lamentation should not be performed in church but on the streets in public to protest the injustice, especially when the crimes affect the entire community. When the faithful lament in church, they hear only their own voices. They focus on themselves. But God would not listen when no genuine sorrow is shown toward the victims, and that could not take place when the victims are not present.

Also, lament must be accompanied by some display of consequences and restoration for the harm done. In Jeremiah's poignant example (Jeremiah 20:7-18), he never stayed focused on God but moved quickly to express his oppressive situation and concluded with a wish that he had never been placed in such a position.





Family members and others are seen during the Maori welcome just before the episcopal ordination Mass at the Vodafone Events Centre in south Auckland, New Zealand, March 7, 2020. Pictured are Maureen Gielen, of Deacon Henk Gielen, second from left, then-Bishop-designate Michael Gielen and Bishop Stephen Lowe, then-bishop of Hamilton, New Zealand. (CNS/NZ Catholic/Joey Bonnevie)

## **Spiritual cruelty and manipulation**

The bishops should have requested the faithful to say: "Have mercy on them, O Lord," in response to the clergy's crimes. Instead, the litany switched focus from the abusers onto the people. This casts the bishops in a deceptively pious light as if the bishops are offering an opportunity for the people to obtain God's mercy for the sins and crimes of the clergy. This highly deceptive tactic is clever, but it is also cruel and manipulative.

No matter how pious the litany may seem, it is because of this piousness that the bishops' behavior assumes a more odious form of spiritual abuse that works to

reverse victim and offender roles.

Forcing innocent people into a sense of collective responsibility for the crimes of priests exposes a pattern of self-centered, arrogant thinking and behavior, devoid of empathy and consideration for others.

More disturbing is the fact that as New Zealanders beg for mercy, the New Zealand bishops, behind closed doors, continue to ignore the cries of the abused, and act arrogantly and suspiciously toward them, refusing to admit wrongdoing in concrete cases where survivors have courageously come forward to disclose what happened to them.

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In fact, in the pastoral redress process "Te Houhanga Rongo - A Path To Healing," the bishops have instructed at least one lawyer to threaten a survivor with having complaints dismissed if they did not remain silent, according to the [Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests](#).

This is not the first time shifting blame has been carried out by New Zealand's Catholic Church leaders. In 2023, New Zealand Bishop [Stephen Lowe of Auckland](#) made it seem that the church had to "atone for its sins" in response to clergy sexual abuse. In 2018, his predecessor Patrick Dunn attempted to [blame the victims' parents](#). At the Abuse in Care Inquiry's [faith-based hearings](#) in 2022, Society of Mary congregational leader Timothy Duckworth tried to blame psychiatrists.

Even if some members of the congregation mistakenly thought they somehow warranted the guilt, it would only be true if they were involved on some level or knew the right thing to do but had failed to do it.

## Putting victims first

There is no question that until the issue of clerical and religious sexual abuse is confronted honestly and the needs of victims are prioritized, then society and not just the church will continue to suffer. As Australian Catholic priest Kevin Dillon wrote almost 30 years ago in response to clerical and religious sexual abuse:

If there is to be any effective recovery from this tragic possession of proven offences, it must begin with a recognition of the suffering endured by victims and their families with every possible means being taken to redress the trauma to which they have been subjected. ... Unless the victims are given top priority, all other efforts to bring credibility to the Church will be doomed to failure.

Given what was mandated by New Zealand's Catholic church leaders, once again we must conclude, as the Abuse in Care Inquiry has done, that sadly the church's leadership either has little idea how to respond appropriately or they are acting with particular cruelty to manipulate the faithful and mislead the wider public.

Either way, the Litany of Lament needs to be revoked and justice for the abused put in its place.

**[Related: New Zealand's leader formally apologizes to survivors of abuse in state and church care](#)**