



Vindicated: Judith Hendriksen had her daughter taken away from her by the Sisters of Mercy.

# Nuns sorry for forced adoption

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The Perth congregation of a Catholic Church order has apologised for its part in past illegal adoption practices in what is being hailed as the first admission of guilt by an Australian church group.

The Sisters of Mercy Perth appealed for forgiveness in a letter to Albany woman Judith Hendriksen, who gave birth at its St Anne's Hospital in Mt Lawley in 1973 and had her baby adopted against her will.

The apology by congregation leader Sister Marie Fitzgerald is another significant step by WA in leading the nation in addressing the issue after Health Minister Kim Hames last month revealed the WA Government would be the first to say sorry.

Experts say tens of thousands of WA babies were taken illegally for adoption between the 1940s and early 1980s when their unmarried mothers were prevented from see-

ing or bonding with their children immediately after birth.

In her letter to Ms Hendriksen, Sister Fitzgerald said the Sisters of Mercy regretted its part in her separation from her daughter Anne and "deeply and sincerely" apologised for the trauma it caused.

"We realise your hurt and anger at being separated from Anne and having been denied the chance to raise her because of the actions and beliefs of others," she wrote.

Sister Fitzgerald also wrote that the order was considering a public apology.

Ms Hendriksen yesterday said a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"It means to me personally that I've finally been vindicated of any wrongdoing because they did illegally take my baby," she said.

"To me it's a great relief because there has just been blame from every quarter — blame for getting pregnant, then blame for wanting to keep your baby and then years

later they blame you for giving them up. Now finally at least those who are responsible are finally admitting it and apologising for it."

Ms Hendriksen said she gave birth at St Anne's, now Mercy Hospital, on her 17th birthday after a Catholic doctor in her home town of Katanning told her parents adoption was the only option.

She was later so traumatised she would search for her baby in Katanning streets and gardens at night while in a daze and for 13 years kept the adoption secret from everyone but her husband.

Ms Hendriksen, who has since had three children with her husband, said Anne did not want anything to do with her.

Christine Cole from the Apology Alliance, which is lobbying for a Federal Government apology, said two public hospitals in the Eastern States had said sorry for past practices but she believed this was a first from a religious group or private hospital.