

UPDATE 80

Royal Commission Case Study 35 Archdiocese of Melbourne



Wednesday 25 November 2015 – Day 2

Day two of the Royal Commission's public hearing into the Archdiocese of Melbourne started with the second survivor witness, Ms Julie Stewart, telling the Commission about the abuse she suffered at the hands of Peter Searson at Holy Family School in the Melbourne suburb of Doveton.

Ms Stewart told the Commission that Searson indecently assaulted her in the confessional in 1984 and 1985. She said she was approached by the police in 1990 and signed a statement in which she alleged being pulled onto Searson's lap and held against his erect penis in the confessional in 1985.

The police indicated to her there was 'not enough to go by' to charge Searson. The police response to the allegation is expected to be looked at later in this hearing.

Ms Stewart also gave evidence about her experience when in 1997 she was involved in a Melbourne Response hearing investigating Searson. She told the Commission that the experience was distressing and that she had felt re-traumatised by it.

In 1998 Ms Stewart received a cheque from the Archdiocese of Melbourne for \$25,000 and an apology from Archbishop Pell.

She told the Commission:

I still cry for the little girl I once was. The little girl that never got to be a normal little girl, doing all the things that little girls should do. The little girl who always just wanted to fit in, but always felt like a weirdo, like a problem. Nothing can ever give that back to me. It is a life sentence, and every day I make a choice to keep going.

Graeme Sleeman, who was the principal at Holy Family School in Doveton from 1984 to 1986 gave evidence about his time at the school while Searson was parish priest in the Holy Family Parish.

Mr Sleeman told the Commission that Searson came to the Parish with a poor reputation including 'having strange relationships with children' and 'massive discrepancies with the way he handles finances'.

He gave evidence about Searson wearing an army uniform around the school and that he had 'held a gun' on student school cleaners. These incidents were reported to the Catholic Education Office (CEO).

He gave evidence that parents had come to him in September 1985 complaining about the way in which confession was being undertaken by Searson. He also gave evidence that he had 'come to the firm conviction' that Searson had interfered with Ms Stewart in the confessional.

He said he reported this and other incidents to the CEO through the regional education consultant. He said he was never informed about how the complaints were dealt with and that he was concerned that the complaints were not being followed up.

Mr Sleeman gave evidence that he resigned from the school in 1986 and that he was unable to gain any further employment in the Catholic education system.

Ms Carmel Rafferty, a former teacher at Holy Family School during the time after Mr Sleeman had been principal, told the Commission that when she arrived at the school she was told by other teachers about Searson's behavior including that children weren't safe around him, particularly in the confessional.

She also gave evidence about a young boy who came to her complaining about Searson touching him inappropriately while serving as an altar boy.

She told the Commission about several other incidents concerning Searson's behavior and her reporting of the incidents to the principal and the CEO.

She said that in March 1993 she resigned from the school after receiving a letter in late 1992 which expressed concerns about her performance. She also described feelings isolated within the school.

She said she felt she had been pressured out of the school.

The hearing will continue.

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