

UPDATE 83

Royal Commission Case Study 35 Archdiocese of Melbourne



Monday 30 November 2015 – Day 5

Day five of the Royal Commission's public hearing into the Archdiocese of Melbourne started with evidence from survivor witness BTO who was abused by Father Wilfred 'Bill' Baker in 1996 while he was parish priest at the Good Shepherd Parish in Gladstone Park, Melbourne.

BTO gave evidence about first being abused in Baker's family home in Maryborough in 1976. BTO had been one of Baker's altar boys. BTO said he struggled to concentrate at school and that the abuse had affected his education and 'continues to affect him today'.

In 1999 he was contacted by police and became part of a prosecution case against Baker in which after initially pleading not guilty he changed his plea to guilty on the day of the trial. BTO found the experience distressing and re-traumatising.

BTO was introduced to the Melbourne Response where a hearing was arranged and he was ultimately offered \$35,000. He told the Commission the payment made him 'feel dirty'.

Baker was jailed in 1999 for 16 counts of indecent assault and one of gross indecency which occurred between 1960 and 1979. He was laicised in 2012 and died in 2014.

Patricia Taylor was the former Principal at St James Primary in North Richmond where Baker was the local priest and employer of Ms Taylor. She told the Commission that she used to have meetings with Baker before he celebrated Mass on school mornings so that he had less reason to come into the school.

She gave evidence about an informal meeting with the CEO before Baker started in the parish in which she was warned not to let children be alone with Baker, not to let children go into a closed confessional with Baker, not to give him staff contact details and not to be in a room by herself with him.

She told the Commission she had not been told specifically why she had been given these warnings but that there had been 'allegations made against Father Baker in previous parishes'.

Asked about how she felt about the conversation being off the record she said 'I felt quite vulnerable, I felt quite abandoned...I was charged with protecting a community from someone who was known to have fairly serious allegations made against them'.

Ms Taylor gave evidence that she'd met Bishop Peter Connors and told him about a relative who had revealed that they had been abused by Baker before he came to North Richmond.

She said Bishop Connors told her 'once a paedophile, always a paedophile'.

She gave evidence that despite Baker requesting children be sent to the presbytery on small errands she never allowed this to happen.

She said changes have now been made within the CEO to ensure there is now a person dealing directly with allegations.

She said 'I have actually worked as a principal for 12 parish priests...and 11 of them were fine, upstanding men who did fabulous work; we got a bad egg'.

Miss Taylor also gave evidence that Baker had a serious drinking problem and by lunchtime he was generally quite intoxicated.

She said she worked at the school for nine years leaving 18 months after Baker had arrived. She said she left partly because of Baker's behavior. She said she spoke to the incoming principal about Baker including the strategies 'to keep Baker on his side of the fence'.

The second survivor witness for the day, BTU, who had his statement read to the Commission by his lawyer, talked about being abused by Fr Ronald Pickering in 1966 as an 11-year old altar boy. Pickering was the assistant priest in the St Mary's Parish in East St Kilda, Melbourne.

Pickering orally abused BTU in the Presbytery on several occasions escalating to masturbating BTU and attempted anal rape.

BTU said that Pickering was in the East St Kilda Parish for about three years and that during that time he had been abused around twice a week. The abuse continued after Pickering was moved from East St Kilda to Warburton Parish.

Pickering was transferred to other parishes over the years while he continued to abuse BTU who had come to see him as a 'father figure'. BTU travelled to the UK with Pickering for four weeks staying with his sister.

BTU told his wife about the abuse in 1982 and the rest of his family about the abuse in 2002.

Pickering left Australia in May 1993 for England and his faculties as a priest were removed in January 1994.

In early 1996 BTU contacted the police but no investigation eventuated. There will be evidence about Victorian police investigations and if Pickering had known about them before leaving Australia.

In 1996 BTU went through the Melbourne Response and was awarded \$30,000. He told the Commission he was a very unhappy child, his education suffered, he is disillusioned with life and has contemplated suicide.

Archbishop Denis Hart gave detailed evidence about the structure, relationships and different roles of people within the Archdiocese including the process of removing priests and the involvement with Rome saying that abusive priests needed to be removed from the priesthood faster.

Archbishop Hart said that 'certainly in my time we've done our level best, and in Cardinal Pell's time...to try to address these matters, to provide relief for victims, to try and provide help. Our efforts may even to this point in time be regarded as imperfect and I'm prepared to accept that, but it's an indication of the way in which we have acted resolutely...'

He told the Commission that prior to the introduction of the Melbourne Response there was a lack of independence and 'will' to investigate complaints within the Archdiocese.

Archbishop Hart gave evidence about the growing important role of women in leadership within the Church saying that the 'glacial' change needed to move 'a good deal quicker'.

He said that reading the victim's statements he had been 'totally appalled by the extent and depravity of the offenders and the suffering and ruination' of survivors lives.

Archbishop Hart described the 'ad hoc' approach taken to complaints before 1996 as 'wholly inadequate' and that none of the seven matters before the Commission 'were properly investigated'. He agreed that, in part, the conduct of Archbishop Little and Vicars-General Cudmore, Deakin and Connors was 'a terrible failure'.

When asked if the Auxiliary Bishop with the responsibility for the Doveton area, Bishop Pell, was part of the 'complete failure' he said he didn't know what Bishop Pell knew, '...I don't know what he did apart from what is in the documents so I'd have to say that would have to be tested'.

The hearing will continue on Tuesday.

Contact: Michael Salmon 0417 495 018