

UPDATE 79

Royal Commission case study 35 Archdiocese of Melbourne



Tuesday 24 November 2015 – Day 1

The first day of the Royal Commission's public hearing looking into the way in which the Archdiocese of Melbourne responded to allegations of child sexual abuse from the mid-to late 1980s until 1996 started today.

In the morning session counsel assisting, Ms Gail Furness, made an opening statement to the Commission in which she outlined the allegations against eight priests and responses from the Archdiocese to the allegations.

Ms Furness told the Commission that between January 1980 and February 2015, 454 people had made claims or substantiated complaints of child sexual abuse about priests, religious, employees and volunteers operating within the Archdiocese of Melbourne. She said 88 percent of incidents occurred from 1950 to 1989 and that the 1970's had the highest number of claims, 142.

According to Ms Furness \$12.8 million was paid by the church as a result of 316 of the claims with an average payment of \$40,000. When taking into account treatment, legal and other costs a total of \$16.8 million was paid to claimants at an average of \$52,000.

Also in the morning former Priest Philip O'Donnell gave evidence about his time in the Gladstone Park Parish in outer suburban Melbourne as an assistant priest to convicted child abuser Wilfred 'Bill' Baker.

Mr O'Donnell spoke about his time as a seminarian in Glen Waverley and Clayton where he described a group within the seminary as 'high camp'. He also gave evidence about his academic training and the involvement within the community.

Mr O'Donnell said Baker had an 'obsession with adolescent boys' and that he was 'immature sexually'.

Mr O'Donnell gave evidence about his reporting of a claim of abuse against Baker to the then Archbishop Little and Vicar General, Monsignor Connors while he was priest in Gladstone Park. Baker was moved from Gladstone Park by the Bishop some five months after the allegation was made to another Parish in Eltham.

Mr O'Donnell also gave evidence about his time in the Parish of Sunbury where he was assistant priest to Peter Searson. Mr O'Donnell described Searson as an incredibly divisive and difficult man.

Searson was transferred to the Holy Family Parish in Doveton in 1984 where there were more complaints about his behavior including having a hand gun at school, animal cruelty and physical and sexualized conduct with children.

Complaints were made to the Catholic Education Office and the Vicar General and Archbishop were aware of the complaints. In 1997 Searson was charged with the unlawful assault of an altar boy, he pleaded guilty and was released without conviction on a good behavior bond. In July 1998 his faculties as a priest were removed.

Ms Furness said there was no serious investigation of any complaint made against Father Peter Searson during the 1980s and early 1990s.

After lunch Mr O'Donnell gave evidence across a wide range of topics including celibacy, the influence of Rome over the management of the child sexual abuse crisis internationally, the influence of the 'right wing' component of the church, the lack of sexual development and understanding within the clergy, reporting of allegations to the police.

Mr O'Donnell gave evidence that he had heard a pedophile's priest confession and that it had effectively tied his hands regarding reporting the priest to the police.

Just before the end of the day the survivor witness, BVD, started giving evidence.

BVD gave evidence about sexual abuse he had suffered in 1978 over six months as an eight-year old altar boy in the Sunbury Parish of Our lady of Mount Carmel by Searson.

BVD gave evidence he had regularly been taken by Searson on Saturday mornings into the presbytery where he was sexually abused.

He said the abuse shattered his innocence and his ability to trust anyone. BVD said he had attempted suicide a number of times, had been admitted to psychiatric care, has difficulty forming relationships and is paranoid.

The hearing will continue tomorrow.

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