

UPDATE 84

Royal Commission Case Study 35 Archdiocese of Melbourne



Tuesday 1 December 2015 – Day 6

Archbishop Denis Hart continued giving his evidence at the start of day six of the Royal Commission's public hearing into the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

He was firstly asked about a document sent by concerned staff from the Holy Family School listing a set of grievances about Searson in his capacity as parish priest and legal advice that suggested a church investigation be undertaken. The Archbishop agreed with Counsel Assisting that this investigation never took place.

When asked why he hadn't acted on Searson immediately, particularly on an allegation of criminal assault on an altar boy, he said he became aware of the allegation a week before the commencement of the Melbourne Response.

He said he immediately issued instructions that Searson not be allowed to call altar boys to Mass and that the incident then be left for the Melbourne Response to investigate. The Archbishop agreed that in hindsight Searson should have been stood down.

Archbishop Hart was questioned extensively about Fr Nazareno Fasciale, who was a priest at various parishes including Geelong and North Fitzroy. The Commission heard Fasciale molested many children over many years in many different parishes.

Evidence showed that the first alleged incident against Fasciale was one year after his ordination in 1952. A further 19 claims were made against him at 13 different places, generally parishes and schools. The last allegation was in 1985. He was charged in 1994 and 1995 but died in March 1996 without the charges being heard.

The Commission heard senior church leaders were aware of much of the abuse including admissions by Fasciale. Consideration was given to him being placed on administrative leave in November 1993 and to the option he was given of resigning on health grounds.

Archbishop Hart said giving this option to offending priests was misleading: 'I believe it's not totally facing the reality of the situation...people don't know adequately and therefore people are not protected', he said.

Archbishop Hart accepted that on a number of occasions misleading information about the reasons for Fasciale's resignation were offered including a statement in 1996 from the then Vicar General, Mon. Cudmore, that he 'wishes to vehemently deny that the church has been covering up complaints for years. Action has and will be taken as soon as reports are made'.

The Archbishop also gave extensive evidence about a number of other offending priests including Wilfred 'Bill' Baker, Ronald Pickering, Desmond Gannon and David Daniel and the extent of knowledge by church leaders about the abuse they perpetrated.

Archbishop Hart accepted that the response of church leaders had often been inadequate and had often left children in danger. He also accepted that church leaders had failed to act on credible information about criminal abuse by priests.

Archbishop Hart told the Commission that given that most of the priests examined in this hearing had offended shortly after ordination then questions need to be looked at regarding preparation for the priesthood.

He agreed that many of the priests offended over a long period despite the church being aware of their offences quite early.

The day concluded with Dr Peter Barker giving evidence about the abuse of a 16 year old boy, BVE, in 1982 by Pickering in St James Parish in Gardenvale and Dr Baker's reporting of the abuse to the Melbourne Archdiocese.

The hearing will continue on Wednesday.

Contact: Michael Salmon 0417 495 018