

Royal Commission Case Study 43

Catholic Church Maitland Newcastle

TJHC update



Wednesday 31 August – Day 1

The Royal Commission's hearing (Case Study 43) into the response of Catholic Church authorities in the Maitland Newcastle region to allegations of child sexual abuse by clergy and religious commenced in Newcastle today.

The case study focusses on the response of the Diocese to allegations made against **Fr Vincent Ryan** and the response of the Marist Brothers to allegations made against **Francis Cable (known as Br Romuald)**, **Thomas Butler (known as Br Patrick)** and **Darcy John O'sullivan (known as Br Dominic)**. Ryan's major offending occurred when he was an assistant priest in 1973-75 at the Merewether Parish. Each of the three Marist Brothers the subject of the case study was, for a time, a teacher at Marist Brothers Hamilton.

In his opening statement Counsel Assisting, Stephen Free, said that the data available to the Royal Commission indicated that the Diocese had received claims or complaints of child sexual abuse that were subsequently substantiated from 158 people. The claims related to 31 different alleged perpetrators. Of these, 58 per cent were priests and 6 per cent were members of a religious order. The Diocese had, to date, paid out a total of \$25.7 million in compensation.

The first witness to provide evidence was **Gerard McDonald**. He attended St Joseph's Catholic Primary School Merewether completing year 6 in 1976. He was abused by Ryan twice a week for almost a year in 1975 when he was a 10-year old altar boy. He described abuse of other altar boys, and the fear, shame and powerlessness he felt. He described efforts to report the abuse, and the response of diocesan and school officials. He reported the matter to the police in 1995.

He described the impact of the abuse on his life, saying he lives with substance abuse and is often overwhelmed by rage, shame and guilt.

'I want to speak for the children of the past present and future. I want this to never happen again to another child. I want the survivors of this abuse to be believed and understood. I want the shame and guilt to be put where it belongs, with the abusers and those who did nothing or lied to protect them,' he said.

CNA the mother of two sons abused by Ryan at St Joseph's School, gave evidence of her experience when she complained to the parish priest, Monsignor Cotter, about Ryan's abuse. He was shocked but he seemed to believe what she said. However she thought to herself what could she do: it was the word of two little boys against that of a priest.

Sr Margaret Ann Geatches of the sisters of St Joseph of Lochinvar then gave evidence. She was the Principal of St Joseph's School when a number of boys at the school disclosed to their parents in December 1975 the abuse they had been suffering from Ryan. She described her interaction with the class teacher Mr Hallinan who had also been told of the abuse by the boys. She described her lack of understanding, at the time, of paedophilia and the absence of protocols at the time for

dealing with complaints of abuse. Her main concern was to keep Ryan away from the children. She spoke with Sr Evelyn Woodward, another member of her congregation about how to go about reporting what she had been told. Sr Evelyn was a trained counsellor. Sr Evelyn said that she would report the matter to Mons Cotter. She understood that this happened and Ryan was removed from the parish to go to Melbourne for treatment.

Sr Evelyn Woodward was the last witness to give evidence. She said that she had at that time never encountered an incidence of clergy sexually molesting children. She said that she was horrified when she heard what Ryan had done. When she spoke with Mons Cotter he asked for her advice about what he should do. She advised that Ryan should be sent to Melbourne for treatment by priest psychiatrist, Dr Peter Evans.

Sr Woodward will continue giving evidence tomorrow.

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