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Catholic Church Ballarat Diocese looks toward change after Royal Commission

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It will come as no surprise to anyone who has followed the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse to hear Anne Levey has not stepped foot inside a Catholic church for more than two years.

Her son Paul's tale of being sent to live with notorious paedophile priest Gerald Ridsdale in Mortlake, Victoria, in the mid-1970s was among the most harrowing heard across more than two years of testimony.

Despite her best efforts to have her teenage son removed from Ridsdale's control, disgraced former Bishop Ronald Mulkearns claimed he could not fulfill her wish despite knowing of the priest's abusive history.

Now living in Albury, Ms Levey said her once-devout commitment to the cross had evaporated after hearing countless cases of rampant sexual abuse and systematic cover-ups.

"I was totally devastated when I went to the commission. I thought it was just Ridsdale," Ms Levey said upon hearing of the volume of paedophile priests operating throughout the Ballarat Diocese. "I used to go to church every Sunday but I just couldn't go down to the church now and look a priest in the face."

While many parishioners like Ms Levey have chosen to abandon the organisation, others with an intimate understanding of the abuse have found comfort in their faith. However in the wake of the scandal there is a clear, growing groundswell calling for major reform of the Catholic Church's governance.

Nowhere clearer was the commission's damning effect on a once mighty institution of western Victoria felt than in the 2016 census, which delivered a blunt critique of the Catholic Church's standing within Ballarat.

Those who registered as having 'no religion' jumped by more than 10 per cent, while the city's official Catholic population dropped to less than 25 per cent.

The role faith had played in allowing abuse to proliferate throughout the diocese was not lost on the nation's most powerful legal inquiry. The commission heard countless instances where clergy

used their unquestioned standing within the community to break into families and gain access to children.

For one Ballarat family, who didn't want to be named, it was this betrayal of trust which shattered their affiliation with an organisation which had once been a pillar of their lives.

Once active members of the Catholic community, the boys' father said the family was willing to "do without a bit themselves" to put their children through the revered Catholic education system. The family felt "honoured" to host senior clergy for meals at their home and were thankful for one particular priest who seemed willing to go out of his way to spend time with the children.

The couple recalled when their boys fronted police with the allegations in the early 1990s, it was not just the senior church hierarchy who sought to silence the scandal. "Once they knew this had happened to our kids the parishioners dumped us," the boys' mother said. "I think they thought we were blaming the church for what happened to our kids. They thought you should never criticise the church.

"A lot of people who we thought were friends have never contacted us to see how we are."

In just a few weeks the pair will make their annual trip to St Patrick's Cathedral for Christmas mass, an unlikely ritual which has survived the trauma. Despite an unwavering belief in the Catholic doctrine, both affirmed the bulk of the church's leaders and followers "simply don't get it".

Despite three separate hearings in both Ballarat and Sydney into abuse across western Victoria, the commission acknowledged the figures accrued were likely well short of the true scope of the damage.

The commission heard from several survivors who "believed a number of their classmates from St Alipius (Christian Brothers School) and St Patrick's College had died by suicide or died prematurely," never given the opportunity to tell their story before a federally-sanctioned inquiry.

While a remarkable 78 claims were made against Ridsdale, the story of Jean Dumaresq's son was not one of them.

An altar boy at Lake Bolac in the 1970s, Ms Dumaresq's son did not reveal the abuse he suffered while his mother was "standing in the church yard" until he was almost 50 years old. A lethal concoction of prescription medication and alcohol in January 2016 led to his untimely death before he ever reported the abuse to the church or police. His mother to this day does not know if the tragic loss was suicide.

Despite the deep sense of betrayal, Ms Dumaresq remains a dedicated member of the Ballarat Diocese. Surrounded by religious paraphernalia in her Lucas home, she claims "it was my faith that kept me going and it's kept me going through all of the trauma I've been through".

“My son did ask me once why I was still going to church after what happened to him but I said my faith is in God, it's not in some priest,” the 72-year-old affirmed. “People think the church is the hierarchy, but the church is a people. We're the church, it's not a building.”

While almost a quarter of the city's population might still class themselves as Catholic, the anecdotal evidence from the pews paints a bleaker picture, particularly among a younger generation struggling to connect with a once revered institution.

While in part this reflects an almost eight per cent spike in Australians removing themselves from religion across the past half-decade, neither modern clergy or parishioners are denying decades of abuse and secrecy has tarnished the Catholic Church's moral authority.

“The older generation have come through and their faith is so strong so they're hanging in there,” Warrenheip parishioner Liz Hanrahan said. “But I have come across a lot of people who have been really strong church goers who have just walked away, some of them you would never expect.

“It's very hard to get the kids interested in religious education anymore...I think (the abuse) has had an effect on the way they think about the church. I just feel as though the church has got to go down to rock bottom and emerge as a new way of operating as a church. A grassroots church.”

In a matter of days the commission will deliver its final diagnosis on the state of the Catholic Church when it hands down its recommendations. Ballarat Diocese Bishop Paul Bird said the church would be judged by its actions to protect children into the future.

His junior, Vicar-general Justin Driscoll, was far stronger in his assessment. While the churches dotted across the small towns of western Victoria affirm the continued presence of Catholicism, Fr Driscoll admitted the trust in the church which was once taken for granted had vanished.

“I still see there would be individuals in the church who would want to pack this whole experience away and move on as though it hadn't happened,” Fr Driscoll said.

“But the ground has so significantly shifted from beneath our feet that what was before won't be regained.”