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Royal Commission Toowoomba Hearing



17 February 2014

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse began its sixth public hearing in Brisbane today regarding a Catholic primary school in Toowoomba in Queensland. This is the second public hearing to directly involve the Catholic Church.

In 2010 Mr Gerard Byrnes, a teacher at the school, was convicted of 44 counts of rape and indecent dealing involving 13 female pupils in his year 4 class. He is currently serving a 10 year prison term.

In her opening address, Gail Furness SC Counsel Assisting, talked about the abuse suffered by the children and the expected direction of the case.

The hearing will investigate:

- The response by the Principal and other members of staff of the school in 2007.
- The response by officers of the Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Toowoomba, to information supplied by the Principal regarding the allegations of child sexual abuse.
- The adequacy and implementation of systems, policies and procedures of the local Catholic Education Office.

After the opening statement parents of four victims provided evidence to the Commission with three of the four parents appearing via video link. They detailed the crimes and the impact of those crimes on victims and their families.

Their statements also discussed the way in which the families and students were dealt with by the school, the Catholic Education Office and the police.

Presiding Member Jennifer Coate gave very specific non publication orders about names of victims and schools.

Catherine Long, student protection contact at the school was cross examined about a range of issues including reporting requirements, understanding of grooming practices and her responsibilities in the role of student protection contact.

Megan Wagstaff was an assistant principal at the school at the time the crimes were committed. Megan started giving evidence late in the day and will continue tomorrow.

For more information on the Truth Justice and Healing Council go to: www.tjhcouncil.org.au
For information on the Royal Commission go to: <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/>

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