

UPDATE 71

Royal Commission – Ballarat



Thursday 21 May 2015 – Day 3

The Royal Commission's hearing continued in Ballarat today.

Counsel Assisting Gail Furness SC tendered a letter provided overnight which included a statement by Cardinal George Pell in response to the previous day's proceedings.

Mr Paul Tatchell then gave evidence. He attended St Patrick's College in 1974 as a boarder. He described the abuse he suffered at the hands of Br Edward Dowlan who pleaded guilty to offences including those against Mr Tatchell and was sentenced to nine years and 8 months in jail. He said Dowlan preyed on vulnerable boys. He told his father about the abuse but was not believed.

Mr Tatchell said he received compensation, but gave it away to homeless people as it was 'blood money'.

Stephen Woods gave evidence about the sexual and physical abuse he suffered at the hands of Br Robert Best when he was a student in grade 6 at St Alipius Boys School. He then went to St Patrick's College in 1973 as a day student. He described the abuse he suffered at the hands of Br. Dowlan and Fr Gerald Ridsdale, who was well known to his family.

Mr Woods made a statement to police in 1993 about Ridsdale, Best and Dowlan. Ridsdale and Dowlan pleaded guilty to the charges and were convicted. Best did not plead guilty but was eventually convicted

Mr Woods went public about his abuse after 1996 partly because he 'wanted to expose the horrific cover-up perpetrated by the senior members of the Catholic Church who I believe knew about Ridsdale, Best and Dowlan for many years but chose to do nothing about it'.

The Commission then heard from **Mr Frank Sheehan** works with survivors of abused by Catholic priests and brothers. He has been President since 2012 of Moving Towards Justice, which is an initiative of lay people within the Church in Ballarat.

He described the 'Quilt of Hope' which the group had made and taken to different parishes to provide a focus for survivors to tell their stories. He also described the work of the group in establishing survivor packages with the financial assistance of the Dioceses and the Christian Brothers.

Andrea Lockhart, senior counsellor Centre Against Sexual Abuse (CASA) gave evidence about CASA's work as a state government funded sexual assault service which provides free counselling and support for survivors and their families.

She spoke about the long term impact of child sexual abuse and the importance of unlimited access to counselling. She also discussed the role of CASA helping people to approach the Church.

Mr BAQ described the sexual abuse he and other boys suffered at the hands of his teachers Br Leo Fitzgerald and Br Stephen Farrell and priest Ridsdale. The abuse by Fitzgerald and Farrell occurred when BAQ was a student at St Alipius. He then attended St Patrick's College Ballarat, where he said many of the children from other primary schools had heard about the abuse. He found it difficult to believe church leadership did not know about it.

Andrew Collins attended a non-Catholic primary school and St Patrick's College Ballarat. He described the sexual abuse he suffered as a child by Br Peter Toomey at St Patrick's College. Br Toomey had been convicted and imprisoned in about 2006.

He has become an advocate for victims of abuse with 140 people in a Ballarat support group he is involved with.

He said most will never speak publicly about the abuse for fear of impact on their family and business. He told the Commission Ballarat is a Catholic town and the Catholic Church is very closed which stops people coming forward. People who speak out are ostracised.

He said he knew of 10 victims of child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions in Ballarat who died last year.

In early 2013 Peter Blenkiron and Mr Collins met Bishop Paul Bird and asked for financial support equivalent to the difference between disability and returned servicemen's pension, \$252 a week.

Mr Collins said Bishop Bird responded saying that such a payment would send the church broke and that in 40 years 'you' will be dead and the church will endure.

Mr Collins went on to say the Diocese and the Christian Brothers have been helpful when asked to meet medical expenses for survivors. Mr Collins' evidence will continue next week.

Full witness statements can be read at:

<http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au/royal-commission/case-study-28,-ballarat,-may-2015,/case-study-28-opening-and-witness-statements.aspx>

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