

UPDATE 86

Royal Commission Case Study 35 Archdiocese of Melbourne



Thursday 3 December 2015 – Day 8

Day 8 of the Melbourne hearing began with retired Bishop Peter Connors, continuing to give evidence about the response of the Melbourne Archdiocese to a number of complaints from the 1960s through to the early 1990s.

Bishop Connors was asked about receiving a call from Dr Peter Barker, who gave evidence to the Commission earlier this week, in 1986 telling him about a young boy who had been abused by Pickering.

Bishop Connors told the Commission that he informed Archbishop Little about the call and that Archbishop Little then spoke to Pickering about the call. Not long after the call Pickering left St James Parish, Gardenvale and travelled to England on extended leave.

Asked if he believed others were aware of the allegation against Pickering he said 'almost certainly'.

Bishop Connors was asked about Fr Desmond Gannon who was an assistant priest at various parishes and parish priest at Braybrook from 1971 to 1980.

The Commission heard 25 people from 14 parishes and schools made either a claim or a substantiated complaint against Gannon from 1954 to 1984.

The first complaint about him was received in April 1993 by the then Vicar General, Monsignor Cudmore. An interview was held with the victim, who said the abuse occurred around 1956 in the presbytery while he was a student at the school in St Anthony's Parish, Glenhuntly.

Shortly after, Gannon essentially admitted the complaint and told of another, five or six children he had abused in different parishes. He was permitted to resign on 'health grounds' on 7 May 1993 and on the same day was granted the title Pastor Emeritus.

Bishop Connors said that describing the reason for his resignation as being on health grounds was a way of concealing the true reason for him being stood down which was because of his 'sexual acting out with a minor'.

Gannon's faculties were removed in July 1993 and his title as Pastor Emeritus was removed by September 1993.

Bishop Connors also gave evidence about Fr David Daniel, who was ordained in 1975 and had seven people make complaints of sexual abuse against him between 1972 and 1994. He was convicted of 16 counts of indecent assault and other offences in 2000 and sentenced to six years jail. His faculties were removed in 2000.

He also gave evidence about Fr Fasciale who had 20 people make claims of sexual abuse against him between 1953 and 1985 in 13 different parishes and schools.

Bishop Connors told the Commission about what he thought other church advisors would have known about Fasciale's sexual abuse behaviour and how the church leadership responded.

During Bishop Connors' evidence Justice McClellan remarked that both Bishop Connors and Archbishop Hart had been 'very frank' in their evidence 'for which the Commission is grateful'.

Bishop Connors told the Commission that he believed Bishops across Australia have 'all put in place people who are working full time in ensuring the protection of children'.

'...every priest in the diocese has gone through a process of training to recognise the danger of sexual assault of minors and how they should respond to any kind of allegation', he said.

William Howitt a former police officer in the Doveton police station gave evidence regarding receiving a complaint in 1993 that Searson had held a knife to a child at the local school.

Mr Howitt gave evidence that he interviewed the victim in the presence of the parents. He also interviewed Searson who said if something occurred there had been no intent of malice. Mr Howitt prepared a brief of evidence which didn't go forward because the parents didn't want the child to go through the court process.

He gave evidence that he contacted 'the church headquarters' and advised them what happened with a view to having them also take some action. While documents indicate that Mr Howitt spoke to the Vicar-General he could not recall that happening.

He gave evidence that he had gone to the church because of his concerns for children but his recollection is that the church would not act without proof.

Bishop Hilton Deakin gave evidence that he was appointed as vicar general in 1987 and later as auxiliary bishop was responsible for the eastern area of Melbourne.

Bishop Deakin gave evidence that he was shocked by the extraordinary 'cover up of the behavior of evil men against children'.

He gave evidence that he was never invited to make any comment about the child sexual abuse claims that came to Archbishop Little. He said Archbishop Little held information about abuse 'matters closely to himself'.

Asked about information that was provided in the Curia, Bishop Deakin said that not all information about abusive priests was provided to the Curia. He agreed with the Commission Chair that this was dishonest.

Bishop Deakin gave evidence about Searson saying that a document shown to him by the Commission about Searson's behavior was 'a first class document for putting a bloke out the backdoor...'. After a meeting in the Doveton parish Bishop Deakin came away thinking that Searson was 'the most despicable man I've ever met in my life'.

The hearing will continue on Friday.

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