

Royal Commission Case Study 28

Ballarat Diocese

TJHC update



Wednesday 2 March, 2016 – Day 24

Today's hearing moved from events in Ballarat to events in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, particularly relating to the time when Cardinal Pell was Auxiliary Bishop and a member of the Curia and Personnel Advisory Board.

This is the third consecutive day in which the Cardinal has given evidence via video link from Rome.

As Auxiliary Bishop, Cardinal Pell was given pastoral responsibility for the Archdiocese's Southern Region, which included the parish of Doveton.

Cardinal Pell said that he was strongly critical of Archbishop Little's handling of sexual abuse complaints against priests. In the case of Peter Searson, who was parish priest of Doveton, the Cardinal said that the Archbishop had a lot of information available to him which he did not share with Cardinal Pell.

He was asked about a letter Archbishop Little received dealing with Searson pointing a handgun at some people. He said the complaint should have been investigated and the complaint suggests Searson was unsuitable to be a parish priest.

He was also taken to several other complaints against Searson including inappropriately talking to children, having a tape recorder in the confessional, having children kneel between his legs while hearing their confessions, and concerns of sexual advances towards children.

The complaints were referred to several church officials including Archbishop Little, the Vicar General and the Catholic Education office. He said the complaints were a basis for standing down Searson and Archbishop Little's failure to act was indicative of his 'blind spot' in dealing with child abuse issues and his inclination to protect the church from scandal. Cardinal Pell agreed this was a similar approach to that taken by Bishop Mulkearns in Ballarat.

Cardinal Pell was asked about various incidents involving Searson which had occurred before Cardinal Pell was Auxiliary Bishop. He agreed that some of the matters should have been the subject of proper inquiries and that they suggested that Searson was unsuitable to continue to serve as a priest.

Taken to a list of grievances about Searson that was presented to Cardinal Pell when, as Auxiliary Bishop, a delegation from Doveton came to see him in 1989, Cardinal Pell said that he was not given an adequate briefing by officers of the Catholic Education Office about the long term issues with Searson at Doveton.

He said that they deceived him in relation to Searson's behaviour. Asked why they would have done that, he said that he was the 'new boy on the block' with a reputation for being outspoken and they wanted to keep a lid on the situation. He suggested the CEO was acting to protect Archbishop Little.

In relation to minutes of the Personnel Advisory Board recording Fr Bill Baker's transfer from Eltham to North Richmond in 1992, Cardinal Pell said that both Archbishop Little and Bishop Peter Connors deceived him because they knew of Baker's child sexual abuse offence in Gladstone Park in 1978 but did not inform Cardinal Pell about it.

Counsel Assisting suggested to Cardinal Pell that his evidence regarding Searson and the reasons he gave for not being briefed fully by the CEO were extraordinary and 'implausible' and designed to 'deflect' from his actions. Cardinal Pell rejected this saying he can only tell the truth.

After putting to Cardinal Pell a list of people claimed to have deceived or lied to him including Archbishop Little, his Vicar General, Bishop Mulkearns and a number of senior staff within the CEO, Ms Furness put to Cardinal Pell that his position was 'extraordinary'.

Cardinal Pell responded: 'Counsel, this was an extraordinary world. A world of crimes and cover-ups. And people did not want the status quo to be disturbed.' He said that when he became Archbishop he 'turned the situation right around so that the Melbourne Response procedures were light years ahead of all this obfuscation and prevarication and deception'.

The hearing will resume at 7.00am (Sydney time) tomorrow.

Contact: Michael Salmon 0417 495 018