

Royal Commission Case Study 43

Catholic Church Maitland Newcastle

TJHC update



Friday 2 September 2016 – Day 3

The Royal Commission's hearing (Case Study 43) into the response of Catholic Church authorities in the Maitland Newcastle region to allegations of child sexual abuse by clergy and religious continued in Newcastle today.

Day 3 opened with evidence from **Dr Peter Evans**, a psychiatrist and former Franciscan priest. He ran La Verna Retreat House in Melbourne and Fr Vince Ryan was sent to see him in 1976 after admitting to child sexual abuse offences against pupils of St Joseph's School, Merewether, in December 1975. Dr Evans said he agreed to assess Ryan but did not commit to treating him. After the assessment, Dr Evans conveyed to Fr Ryan that it was his responsibility to seek treatment for his personality disorder and that he should undertake the therapy in his home environment of Newcastle. Dr Evans was not asked to, and did not, provide a report back to the Diocese of the assessment he had made. It was a confidential assessment and it was Fr Ryan's responsibility to go back to his referring doctor and Mons Cotter to report that the treatment should take place in Newcastle.

Ms Maureen O'Hearn was next to give evidence. She has been a social worker for over 30 years and has been head of Healing and Support Services at the Diocese's Zimmerman Services since 2007.

She described the activities of Healing and Support Services, a unique, open-ended service which is run by the Diocese but operates independently of it. She said that Healing and Support Services provides a supportive response to those who have been directly affected by childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by personnel of the Diocese. She described the importance of trauma-informed care and the benefits of separating claims investigations from healing and support. "We don't see our role as testing those allegations, we just accept what the person has said, welcome them, and offer them support", she said.

Zimmerman Services enjoys a good working relationship with NSW Police and the police are probably the biggest referrer of cases to Zimmerman Services. Zimmerman Services is a model which other dioceses and religious organisations have examined for possible adoption in their areas.

Bishop Bill Wright has served as the Bishop of Maitland Newcastle since June 2011. He is co-chair of the National Committee for Professional Standards under *Towards Healing* and is a member of the Truth Justice and Healing Council.

In opening his evidence he was invited by Counsel Assisting to read the section in his written statement in which he apologised on behalf of the Diocese to all the men who had suffered, and had continued to suffer, from the abuse of Vince Ryan. He apologised also to the families affected by that abuse.

A critical issue in the case study is the extent of the knowledge of Ryan's criminal behaviour that was possessed by Mons Cotter and Bishop Leo Clarke before Ryan was placed back into ministry from December 1976.

Taken by Counsel Assisting to a number of documents critical to the resolution of that issue, Bishop Wright said that it was clear that Mons Cotter had knowledge going beyond mere rumour of Ryan's offending. What Mons Cotter said in interviews he gave to various investigators in the 1990s about his knowledge of that offending, was untrue.

As to Bishop Clarke's knowledge of Ryan's history of offending, Bishop Wright said that, to him, the evidence was equivocal as to what Bishop Clarke knew.

Counsel Assisting took Bishop Wright to his statement where he dealt with the question of whether it was appropriate to continue with the supervision arrangements for Ryan that had been put in place by Bishop Malone following Ryan's release from prison or whether the step of seeking Ryan's laicisation should now be considered. Bishop Wright said that there had been two developments which might now suggest that Ryan should be laicised. The first was that it had now emerged that Ryan might not have been totally frank in disclosing all the offences he had committed. The second was the growing expectation in the community that priests convicted of child sexual abuse offences should be laicised.

Asked by the Commission Chair whether all leaders of the Church in Australia now understood the seriousness of the problem of child sexual abuse in the Church and the need to address the problems that gave rise to it, Bishop Wright said that some leaders had to think about these matters more often than others. He also said that the picture that emerged from the work of the Commission was that the great preponderance of offences occurred in the 1970s and 1980s and, since the 1990s, a great many things had happened in the Church and in society that could be expected to lessen the incidence of child sexual abuse within institutions.

Asked further by the Commission Chair what the Church was doing to address the problem of child sexual abuse, Bishop Wright referred, amongst other things, to the decision taken by the Australian Bishops and religious orders to establish a national company to set child protection standards and to audit compliance of the dioceses and orders with the standards.

Also in response to questions from the Chair, Bishop Wright gave evidence regarding the contribution to the child sexual abuse issue within the Church of clericalism, deficiencies in the formation and training of priests and religious and the limited role of women in the Church. Bishop Wright accepted that clericalism had contributed to the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. He said, however, that the status of the clergy had changed over time. He also referred to changes in the selection and training of candidates for the priesthood and the increasing involvement of lay people, including women, in key Church bodies and in conducting training and formation of priests.

Two child sexual abuse survivors, CQW and CNG, gave evidence after Bishop Wright.

CQW had attended Marist Brothers School in Maitland from 1959. In 1961 when CQW was in year 6, Br Romuald came to teach at the school. CQW described abuse perpetrated by Br Romuald, the impact on his life and faith and the time it took to disclose the abuse. He described his experience giving evidence at Romuald's trial and the impact which the serious offences against other boys revealed in those proceedings had on him.

Around 1987 **CNG** became an altar boy at St Joseph's, Cessnock, where Fr Vince Ryan was the parish priest. CNG described in his statement the abuse perpetrated by Ryan. He disclosed the abuse as a child to his grandmother, mother and a nun at the school. He finished school and went to university. He was married with four children when police approached him to make a statement because Ryan had named him as one of his victims. He described the devastating impact of having to recall the abuse after having moved on with his life. He welcomed the wonderful support he had received from Maureen O' Hearn of Zimmerman Services since making his statement to the police.

The hearing will continue on Monday.

Contact: Michael Salmon, Director Communications, 0417 495 018