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Church backed by top cop

JOHN FERGUSON, VICTORIAN POLITICAL EDITOR THE AUSTRALIAN JUNE 20, 2013 12:00AM

ANOTHER high-profile commissioned officer has been revealed backing the Catholic Church's Melbourne-based sex abuse complaints system before the force went to war with the church under the direction of former Office of Police Integrity deputy director Graham Ashton.

Former Victoria Police deputy commissioner Ken Jones is quoted in correspondence as saying Victoria Police was "very content" with the way the church had implemented its sex abuse complaints system and that the force was "very content that victims are being properly dealt with".

His backing is at odds with later criticism by Mr Ashton - now a Victoria Police deputy commissioner - who is facing allegations of false and misleading evidence to the Victorian parliamentary inquiry into child sex abuse. Sir Ken quit the force in 2011 after falling out with then chief commissioner Simon Overland. Mr Overland hired Mr Ashton from the OPI in 2009 and Mr Ashton took over some of Sir Ken's responsibilities after he left.

Mr Ashton told the inquiry the church had never reported a single case of child sex abuse, a claim that has been debunked by the church's child sex abuse independent commissioner.

Mr Ashton may soon be forced to explain to the inquiry a series of contested facts he gave as evidence and that appeared in the police submission to the inquiry.

Peter O'Callaghan QC, the independent commissioner in charge of the church's Melbourne-based complaints system, has accused Mr Ashton and the force of false and misleading evidence. If allegations of false and misleading evidence are pursued and substantiated, Mr Ashton and the force could be held in contempt.

Mr Ashton's criticism of the church's complaints system were at odds with the views of Sir Ken and Assistant Commissioner Wendy Steendam, as revealed in yesterday's *The Australian*.

A church letter sent to police in late 2011 states that Sir Ken had apologised for the amount of time wasted trying to get an agreement between police and the church to ensure more co-operation between the groups on the child sex issue. Sir Ken is also reported discussing his support for the way the church had conducted its complaints process. Ms Steendam is quoted in evidence submitted to the inquiry stating that police were not accusing the church of failing to co-operate.

Despite this, the force's submission to the child sex inquiry and evidence by Mr Ashton was highly critical of the complaints system, also known as the Melbourne Response.

The *Australian* also understands that in 1996, when the Melbourne Response was set up, police released a statement backing the way the system had been constructed, as well as the appointment of Mr O'Callaghan.

A spokeswoman for the inquiry said: "The committee has the capacity to recall any witnesses to give further evidence and the committee chair has said that to all witnesses at the beginning of every hearing session."